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Stories from an Oklahoman: George Milburn's style and satire

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by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

George Milburn died more than ten years ago. He wrote his best stories before 1940. Few people are familiar with his work today. A study of this writer from Oklahoma might seem to be rather pointless; however, looking closely at his work can be quite delightful. A picture of life in a small town in America is only part of what Milburn has to give a careful reader. The writing itself could serve as a model for anyone wanting to learn to write well. One could practically make a police sketch from his descriptions of various characters he is so graphic in his portrayals. Milburn describes his characters' actions as precisely as stage directions.

Milburn has a story about Zionism with questions still plaguing those who now live in Israel; Black Americans still face many of the problems he portrays. The various attitudes displayed by his characters regarding World War I remind one of the current disagreements over Viet Nam. A student complains about compulsory R. O. T. C. in college, and it sounds like the 1960's. An elderly woman has to spend her widowhood visiting members of her family, bringing to mind the current problems of the aging.

George Milburn's topics aren't out of date in the 1970's, but his stories would be interesting even if they were. His close attention to detail makes the various stories

historically valuable. And excellent satire is rather difficult to come by in these days of mediocre television situation comedy.

Milburn's enjoyment of the language of the common American is evident, and his love of writing comes through in his stories--and, perhaps, his love of Oklahoma. He shows the cruelty and ignorance of the inhabitants of these small towns, but he has other characters whose goodness serves as a foil. Reading a now obscure author is a series of discoveries, and learning about him as a person becomes an exciting venture.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The only really comprehensive study of George Milburn and his work is a pamphlet called George Milburn by Steven Turner, part of the Southwest Writers Series. Here, and in other sources, one learns that George Milburn was born in Coweta, Indian Territory, April 27, 1906.[1] A map of Oklahoma reveals that Coweta is a small town near Tulsa, Oklahoma. It is difficult not to assume that Coweta is the model for many of Milburn's stories. Turner obtained a list of Milburn's various jobs from an application filled out for federal employment in 1951. This reveals an early interest in journalism, beginning at age sixteen for the Pawhuska Daily Capital (p. 2). This journalistic interest is obvious in many of George Milburn's stories.

Milburn's college career left its mark on his writing also. Although he never graduated from any college, he was a student at Tulsa University, Oklahoma A & M, and Oklahoma University (Turner, p. 3). In 1928, while at Oklahoma University, he married Vivien Custard, the "prettiest coed he could find," according to Esquire ("Backstage with Esquire," March 1936, p. 26). He alternated his college days with the bohemian life often

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[1] Steven Turner, George Milburn, Southwest Writers Series, No. 38, general ed. James W. Lee (Austin, Texas: Steck-Vaughn Co., 1970), p. 1. Subsequent references to Turner are to this work.

stereotyped in the life of a young author. Milburn spent time in Chicago, compiling joke books, and in New Orleans, writing the stories that later became Oklahoma Town (Turner, p. 3). Milburn relates various anecdotes about the Chicago and New Orleans days in Ben Botkin's Folk-Say IV. He writes of prostitutes in Chicago and of rats eating his soap in New Orleans.[2] Turner reports that the editor of the New Orleans Times-Picayune liked his stories and sent them to H. L. Mencken, who immediately used all printable stories in the American Mercury (Turner, p. 4). Mencken's enthusiastic reaction to Milburn's stories will be detailed subsequently.

In a very few years, from 1930 to 1936, all of George Milburn's best works were published--Hobo's Hornbook (1930), Oklahoma Town (1931), No More Trumpets and Other Stories (1933), and Catalogue (1936). In 1932, he left Oklahoma for good for all practical purposes. Turner speculates that the transient life Milburn led thereafter may have been a factor in the falling off of his productivity later (Turner, p. 1).

Facts known about George Milburn's life after leaving Oklahoma are reported in full in Steven Turner's book. Briefly, it is revealed that Milburn won two Trask

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[2] George Milburn, "Some Kind of Color: Notes on Being a Son," Folk-Say IV, ed. by Benjamin A. Botkin (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1932), pp. 41-2.

awards and a Guggenheim fellowship; he went to Europe in 1934, but his wife's illness forced them to return early in 1935 (Turner, p. 5). This apparently marked the beginning of a downward trend with him. While living in Pineville, Missouri, upon his return, he wrote the short story "Road to Calamity" (Southern Review, vol. 2, 1936, pp. 63-84), which was, according to Turner, an ominous prophecy (p. 5).

From 1937 to 1941 Milburn collaborated with Alan Seager in a radio program called Scattergood Baines; in the 1940's he went to Hollywood to write for the movies and subsequently worked for Paramount and Warner Brothers (Turner, p. 6). In 1947, Flannigan's Folly was published; a year later his wife filed for divorce (Turner, p. 6). The years which followed found Milburn engaged in various activities--as a rewrite man for the New York World-Telegram (1949), editor of the Organic Farmer (1950), teacher of creative writing at New York University (1950's), writer of magazine articles (1950's). He also worked on a novel called Disaster Like the Dandelion (Turner, p. 7). This work was never finished and in 1958, Milburn went to work for the Department of Motor Vehicles in New York City as a file clerk and later in the Workmen's Compensation branch, so that he might have an assured income with hospitalization benefits (Turner, p. 7).

Reading his early works and seeing pictures of him as a confident young man with tongue-in-cheek sense of humor makes it difficult to accept this end. In 1963, Milburn had his first heart attack, followed by an operation in 1964. He died in 1966 of his heart problems and was also found to have cancer of the liver (Turner, p. 8). His obituary in the New York Times called him "a popular short story writer of the late 1920's and 1930's" (23 September 1966, p. 37).

Turner's George Milburn is invaluable; however, many of these biographical facts can be learned elsewhere. The most fascinating biographical tidbits come from Milburn himself in Folk-Say IV. Anecdotes here titillate the imagination. Many reveal a sort of hero-worship for his father who gave George his love of reading and earthy sense of humor. And most important, one suspects, an abundance of love was what his father gave him. Downey Milburn once carried him to a circus because George had stepped on a rusty nail and couldn't walk. Though his father didn't enjoy it much, George did. As a train went by, he found the music and yellow light so beautiful that he wanted to weep ("Some Kind of Color," p. 30).

Milburn reveals in Folk-Say IV his life-long love for writing with a story which shows how he artfully creates an effect without spelling it out. He says

that after his father read him a condensed version of Robinson Crusoe at a tender age, he liked it so much he started to write a story just like it--"That was before I had learned the alphabet" (p. 29). Another story in "Some Kind of Color" reveals that, although most of his stories make fun of the rural types in his hometown, they were important to him. A man came up to him on graduation night and said, "George, me and my wife just been looking at you, and we decided that any boy with a face as ugly as yourn ought to amount to something" (p. 33).

George Milburn did "amount to something" as is revealed by the numerous stories he wrote which were published in such magazines as Vanity Fair. The "Editor's Uneasy Chair" section of this slick magazine (January 1931) devotes a column called "Conquering Hobo" to Milburn (p. 23). This short biographical article has Milburn asserting that his father was "that paradox, an honest lawyer" who didn't prosper at Coweta because he refused to exploit the Indians (p. 23). What Downey Milburn did do was give his son an excellent education and a taste for literature. Vanity Fair includes a picture of a very young and rather handsome George Milburn, stating that Milburn is married, collects miniature elephants and gutter songs, and is a student of anthropology.

Esquire devotes some space to Milburn, also. In the March 1936 issue, one learns that Milburn is of Irish, Spanish, Scotch, and German descent, and that poverty forced him to write the saga of a small Oklahoma town (p. 26). "Backstage with *Esquire*" (April 1944, p. 32) mentions the Guggenheim fellowship he received and his writing for the *Scattergood Baines* and Bob Burns radio programs.

MILBURN AS A SOUTHWESTERN WRITER

George Milburn was from Oklahoma, as noted earlier, and is often classified as a regional--Southwestern--writer. Steven Turner's George Milburn concentrates on the regional aspect of Milburn's writing and is an excellent source for viewing him from this point of view. Turner carefully lists the parts of Milburn's works which are specifically set in Oklahoma: all of Oklahoma Town, "The Fight at Hendryx's" from No More Trumpets and Other Stories, Catalogue, and Flannigan's Folly. Turner points out details in other stories which place them in Oklahoma, although the actual location is not named. Turner feels that Milburn lost much depth and flavor when he turned from regional writing to the "better developed" stories in No More Trumpets (p. 20). One might be tempted to speculate that Milburn wished to be regarded as something more than a "regional" writer--that he hoped to avoid a kind of deadend classification. Milburn's biography reveals that he knew more of life than Oklahoma, but Steven Turner is correct in his opinion that it is as a writer of Oklahoma tales that George Milburn excels. Turner says that Milburn's focus is better when speaking of Oklahoma, that his details are like those of a photographer, that the later stories, though perhaps better developed, are a bit fuzzy (p. 21).

Milburn is definitely recognized as being part of a group which can be defined as Southwestern writers. Southwest Heritage defines Southwest as connoting the final thrust of American colonization toward the south and west--the last push of the frontier.[3] The editors state in the introduction to this work that Southwestern literature is a protest against mechanization and regimentation of modern life (p. 17). Milburn's work definitely fits this description as he conforms nicely to one of the standards of value of Southwestern literature set down in Southwest Heritage--"racy and indigenous revelations of character, however crudely set down" (p. 20). Milburn's writing is far from "crude," of course, though some of his characters might be called so.

Part Three of Southwest Heritage, "Literature of the Contemporary Scene, 1918--," mentions Milburn specifically, saying that Milburn writes of the "sunburnt, frame-built towns of the plains, ugly, crude, complacent" with a few Indians and Negroes and that the "white people are mostly poor." His characters are found to be "lusty, cruel creatures" and though he writes with grim humor, he is not bitter and "offers no panaceas" (p. 113).

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[3] Mabel Major, T. M. Pearce, and Rebecca W. Smith, Southwest Heritage (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1939), p. 9. Subsequent references are to this edition.

Edwin W. Gaston, Jr., offers in The Early Novel of the Southwest (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1961) some interesting criteria for a literary work. He says that it must be viewed in relation to its background as a product of its time and place (p. ix). Milburn's stories are about humanity in general but owe much of their originality to the types to be found in Oklahoma at that particular time. Gaston goes on to say that this criterion is valuable in shedding light on the author's life (p. ix). One consistently imagines Milburn to be a citizen of the Oklahoma towns he writes about and makes many assumptions about him from reading the stories.

Gaston lists Milburn as one of the major regional novelists of the thirties (p. 201). The Early Novel of the Southwest was published in 1961; it characterizes Milburn as a writer "long since removed to writing assignments and editing ventures in many parts of the nation" and one who "has won substantial recognition for his novels and stories" (p. 202). Gaston says the theme of Catalogue is "village boredom" (p. 208).

Roundup Time (New York: Whittlesey House, McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1943), edited by George Sessions Perry is another book about Southwestern literature. Mr. Perry makes some rather pertinent comments concerning George

Milburn in the introduction to this work. He says that "Oklahoma unquestionably helped fashion George Milburn" and then adds that "God must have had something to do with it" (p. vii). Perry says that some of the first signs of criticism of the Southwestern scene came from such people as George Milburn (p. x), that Milburn is there to tell of "plain people who dream into mail-order catalogues and wear flour-sack drawers" (p. xi). As might be predicted from this remark, Perry anthologizes "Imogene Caraway" from Oklahoma Town whose baptism in flour-sack drawers brands her "Bar None." The piece in Perry's book which evaluates Milburn's work critically is called "The Southwest in Fiction" by Rebecca W. Smith (p. 377). She says that after World War I, the Southwest began to catch up in fiction (p. 377). This "catching up" included George Milburn's satiric Oklahoma Town (p. 379). Although she regrets somewhat Milburn's American Mercury mannerisms, she feels that Milburn's disillusioned tales of an Oklahoma small town are especially brilliant (p. 379).

Ima Honaker Herron's The Small Town in American Literature (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1939) comments more fully on Milburn's treatment of the small town.

> A loud echo of the noise of the fight against the small town is heard in the Oklahoma stories of George Milburn. In Oklahoma Town (1931) Milburn writes of the daily happenings of his community both as he has observed them and as he has listened to "old-timers" boastfully spin tall

> tales of the Indian Territory. Milburn shows complete familiarity with the Oklahoma idiom and keen observation of the minutiae of town life. Sometimes the lives he portrays are twisted, grotesque and tragic; sometimes homely and often unfruitful; and again normally happy. No More Trumpets and Other Stories (1933), another array of warped and mediocre personalities found among Oklahomans and Texans, and his first novel Catalogue (1937) give proof that George Milburn abundantly deserves the acclaim for which he made a strong bid in Oklahoma Town (pp. 427-28).

Milburn serves as a fine example of the main point Ms. Herron is making in her book--that the tradition of the village as embodying miraculous virtues has been radically changed by the interpreters of the 1920's (p. 432). The writers who dealt with the village were then more apt to portray the dullness and stupidity of the small town than its pastoral delights (p. 432).

WORKS

As noted earlier in this paper, George Milburn's work is at this point relatively obscure; therefore, a detailed description of the contents of his various works will help to familiarize the reader with the books or articles being mentioned. Brief summaries of various reviews of these books are included to show the enthusiasm with which many of Milburn's works were received initially. Weaknesses are also pointed out in these reviews; this helps to predict the ways in which Milburn ultimately falls short of reaching the potential many saw in him. The reviews also help to place him among his comtemporaries and show what writers he may profitably be compared with.

The list of books George Milburn wrote is not long; his best work was done by the time he was thirty years old (Turner, p. 1). In the following rather lengthy sections, I plan to examine his work in its entirety, and after summarizing critical opinion, as related above, state my own discoveries and reactions upon reading this author. Though some of this material is available in Steven Turner's George Milburn, much of it is here compiled for the first time. Turner's emphasis was on Milburn as a Southwestern writer; I plan to show him from a broader viewpoint.

The Hobo's Hornbook and Related Studies

The Hobo's Hornbook (New York: Ives Washburn, 1930) reflects an interest Milburn had in folklore for all his life (Turner, p. 37). Even in the later 1950's, according to Turner's book, Milburn was thinking of revising The Hobo's Hornbook, but he was unable to get a commitment from a publisher (p. 7). Hobo's Hornbook is still valuable, however, since Milburn learned these songs from the hoboes and tramps themselves.

"Poesy in the Jungles" (American Mercury, May 1930), which also serves as the introduction to Hobo's Hornbook, explains the relationship between a "jocker" or older tramp and his "preshun" or young boy who is an apprentice tramp (p. 8). Milburn's later story "Heel, Toe, and A 1, 2, 3, 4" from No More Trumpets provides an example of the sometimes pathetic relationships in the "jungle."

Various related studies with lists of words used mainly by particular groups in American subcultures were published between 1929 and 1932. "The Taxi Talk" (Folk-Say I, 1929) is the earliest of these articles. In this Milburn explains the concept that he is dealing with in these articles: "Attached to every trade and occupation there is an abstruse, semi-technical set of terms, familiar only to the initiated" (p. 108). His initiation into the taxi-drivers' group came while in Chicago, patronizing

a makeshift restaurant called the Island (p. 108). He also explains in this article that these words may come and go, but they tend to remain within the original group since no outlet exists for them (p. 112). Milburn himself perpetuated a few in his stories.

"Convict's Jargon" (American Speech, April 1932) is Milburn's piece revealing the convicts' vocabulary compiled by a Daniel Conway, an inmate at Auburn Prison in New York (p. 436). "Circus Words" (American Mercury, November 1931) is a similar listing, compiled by H. L. Johnson (p. 351). These articles reveal that Milburn was a man intensely interested in the language of the common people, though one observes in reading the articles that Milburn's own vocabulary is almost "high-brow" by comparison. For example, the subtitle for Hobo's Hornbook is A Repertory for a Gutter Jongleur.

Hobo's Hornbook received excellent reviews at the time of its publication. Glen Mullin, in New York Herald Tribune Books (31 August 1930), says Milburn "must have inhaled the smoke of innumerable jungle campfires" in collecting these songs (p. 2). Percy Hutchison of the New York Times Book Review (8 June 1930) says that this "primer" is for those who want to learn something of the literary life of "human derelicts;" though this statement sounds a bit condescending Mr. Hutchison goes on to say

that the book is valuable because it is an addition to "authentic picaresque documents" (p. 5). Nels Anderson, of The Survey (October 1930), finds Hobo's Hornbook to be the best collection of hobo songs that had appeared at the time (p. 45).

Perhaps Louis Untermeyer's piece in Saturday Review of Literature (11 October 1930) places Hobo's Hornbook most accurately in American literature, since he discusses it in relation to other collections of types of folksongs. He finds Milburn to be the perfect person to collect hobo and tramp songs (fortunate under the circumstances); Untermeyer says that Milburn's combination of youth, enterprise, enthusiasm and taste fits him for the job (p. 197). At the end of this review, Untermeyer speculates that the radio may be the great leveler that will make folksongs a tradition; to say that he spoke prophetically is an understatement (p. 197).

The question, of course, is a question that is behind the entire study of George Milburn's work--how important is it now? Is The Hobo's Hornbook a work of lasting value? From one viewpoint, it is impressive that he collected these songs for a more or less unselfish reason--making an addition to the written history of the folklore peculiar to the United States. Many of the songs he collected are still considered to be classics of hobo lore.

A recent book about hoboes, Hard Travellin': The Hobo and His History, by Kenneth Allsop (New York: The New American Library, 1967), mentions Milburn but seems to indicate that Milburn's treatment of the tramp was rather naive. Allsop states that a "jocker" and his "preshun" are usually homosexuals (p. 212), hardly the "knight and squire" Milburn romanticizes (pp. 216-17). The fact that Allsop mentions Milburn's book several times indicates, however, that Hobo's Hornbook was a book to consider, even in 1967.

Oklahoma Town

Milburn's real career as a writer of fiction began with Oklahoma Town (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., Inc., 1931). Upon first picking up this book, one hardly knows what to expect. Cowboys and Indians and dance-hall girls may perhaps come to mind--or an idyllic story of pioneers or a cynical story of an Oklahoma oil boom town. The book is actually filled with brief anecdotes and character sketches, some of which sound a bit familiar, others which only an observer of an actual Oklahoma town of the first few decades of the state's existence could have written. Oklahoma Town serves an important function in relation to the rest of George Milburn's work because certain character types in his later books, especially

Catalogue and No More Trumpets, can trace their genealogies back to Milburn's first and most original work of fiction.

The narrator of Oklahoma Town takes the position of a neutral observer. He lives in the town and tells these often outrageous stories in a very matter of fact way. Reading Oklahoma Town shows one how George Milburn sees the human race--the various inhabitants may be either colorless or colorful, but they are always interesting. That he rather admired Black people and deeply feels the injustices they endure in such a town with its various Jim Crow laws and general injustice can be seen in "The Nigger Lover" (p. 3), "Willie Chalmers" (p. 34), and "The Nigger Doctor" (p. 72). Another group--a rather large one--describes the "eccentrics" of the town, those with no particular harm in them, just a small amount of craziness. Such stories as "Looie McKindricks" (p. 27), "Marty Titsworth" (p. 54), "Captain Choate" (p. 124), and "Banker Brigham" (p. 145) are examples of this classification. Other topics are greed--"Iron Filigree" (p. 67)--and sudden violence--"Yellow Paint" (p. 60) and "Shorty Kilgore" (p. 85)--which are almost trademarks of Milburn's satire. Other topics for satire, such as ignorance, gullibility, and religion, will be discussed later in the paper.

The reviewers loved Oklahoma Town. Only Bookman (July 1931) found serious fault with the book. The review finds these stories to be merely "anecdotes and gossip," saying the book is a "mere exposition of a set of curios" (p. iv). Harvey Fergusson of the New York Herald Tribune Books also agrees that these stories are anecdotes and gossip, perhaps, but that in the retelling of old jokes folklore comes in. "These undying fables of the sex comedy are folk tales that have proved their vitality by surviving, just as formal literature does, and they need only the touch of a conscious artist to reveal their hidden values" (1 March 1931, p. 6). Fergusson puts Milburn in excellent company when he compares Julian Reynolds of "A Young Man's Chance" (p. 158, Oklahoma Town) to Eliot's Prufrock and Shakespeare's Adonis (p. 6).

Stanley Vestal's opinion is important because Vestal is judging a fellow Oklahoman; Vestal also mentions the folklore element, one aspect of Milburn's work which can be considered universal. Reviewing for Saturday Review of Literature (7 March 1931), Vestal finds Oklahoma Town to be a kind of prose Spoon River Anthology (Edgar Lee Masters) and says that Milburn's book is perhaps better. Vestal says that Milburn knows folklore so well that the book becomes folklore, putting into permanent form

incidents taken from popular stores of village history (p. 363).

Nation (11 March 1931) states that it cannot "sufficiently praise" these stories, though they lack the "milk of human kindness" (p. 278); the review hails Milburn as a new genius (p. 279). New Republic (13 May 1931) finds the stories reminiscent of "immemorial smutty jokes" (p. 363) and "country tales told over a jug of cider" (p. 363).

Other reviews comment on Milburn's method of presenting his stories and on the effectiveness of his satire. Southwest Review (April 1931) characterizes Milburn's method as "extreme naturalism which does not underline its crucial passages with personal commentary" (p. vi). This review makes a point somehow missed in others, perhaps because it's rather obvious; Southwest Review says that it is Milburn's sense for the "comedy of his material" that distinguishes his work (p. viii). The New York Times Book Review helps to place Milburn as compared to some other writers of satire and irony of the day. The review says that Milburn manages to mingle the prejudices of the South with those of Sinclair Lewis's Gopher Prairie (8 February 1931, p. 9). This review says that Oklahoma Town is not a Winesburg (Sherwood Anderson) because it is too bitter, although Oklahoma Town ends in the same

way as Winesburg, Ohio, with the young man going off to the city (p. 9).

Reading these reviews, one wonders why this book was the most highly praised of any of Milburn's work. Turner, in relating Mencken's enthusiasm for the Oklahoma stories, says that they "have the kind of compressed honest observations of life that every editor hopes to find" (p. 9). The stories of Oklahoma Town have other values for those reading them in the 1970's. The tales reveal attitudes of people in the early 1920's about World War I, race relations, religion; and although these stories might be considered "regional," something of the universal comes through, I suppose, because people are the same everywhere in many ways. The satire Milburn accomplishes so brilliantly manages to show the reader man's ignorance, his cruelty, his harmless eccentricity, and people's inability to live up to one's expectations of them. The satire is thereby turned back to the reader, who may examine his own limitations.

Milburn's close observation of the details of daily life tells us what styles in dress were popular then--Myrtle Birchett's "pair of little short drawers that wouldn't wad a shotgun" (pp. 38-9) and her striped silk hose under her fringed short skirt (p. 40); the type of machinery common in the day--Old Man Chalmers'

cotton gin (p. 34); and the hairstyles of the day--Olla Obenchain's "bob," Orville Burke's "pompadour" (p. 177). The book has humor, satire, and detail, and Milburn tells all the stories with a straight face.

The stories of Oklahoma Town were in demand for publication in various magazines prior to being presented in book form. Several were printed in the following popular magazines of the time: American Mercury, Vanity Fair, Esquire, Folk-Say, Harper's and Southern Review.

Mencken and Magazines

H. L. Mencken published many of Milburn's stories of Oklahoma in the American Mercury; however, Milburn was most under his influence when writing No More Trumpets. It is, therefore, appropriate to make some remarks concerning Mencken and Milburn at this point in the paper.

Mencken had a reputation for publishing new writers, and he made some contributions to popular periodical journalism which reflect Milburn's philosophy of writing. In his A Portrait from Memory (New York: Thomas, Yoseloff, Inc., 1956), Charles Angoff summarizes Mencken's innovations in this area. "It was Mencken who democratized quality periodical journalism. He brought the common man and his enthusiasms and agonies into its pages. He vitalized and humanized the discussion of politics and politicians through humor

and satire" (p. 10). From this summary alone it is obvious that Milburn would be Mencken's cup of tea, as they say, and in the chapter called "New Writers" in Angoff's book, Angoff describes Mencken's reaction to Milburn's sketches of Oklahoma life.

> "My boy, here is something!" he said. "Really something! If you don't like this, you are even crazier than I thought you were. If you don't like this, I will write to the President of Harvard, whatever the hell name he has, and I will tell him to revoke your degree. Worse than that, I will ask Cardinal Hayes to put a curse upon you. . . . I tell you, Angoff, this is really the stuff. Some lousy academician, Professor Big Ear, or maybe it was Professor Dandruff, sent me the stuff, and I kept it around for a couple of days thinking it was the usual student hogwash about the rank of Walter Pater as an essayist, or some fictional rubbish about the most interesting character I have met while at Camp Idlewild last summer. But then one afternoon when I had the itch, you know where, I began to read it, and right away I saw how mistaken I was. So, stop everything you are doing, even if you are reading the Psalms, and read this. It is a hell of a lot better than the Psalms, and the author of the Bible had better begin thinking of his laurels"(p. 110).

The fact that Mencken was interested in "American" words is shown in his The American Language; Milburn, of course, had a similar interest as revealed in the word-compilation articles mentioned earlier. Thus, it is not surprising that Milburn went on to write a few articles for the American Mercury, aside from the Oklahoma sketches which were published. These articles often illustrated Mencken's own political

leanings. "Menace" (March 1932, pp. 324-34) is about an anti-Catholic newspaper called The Menace, whose customers were the Baptists, Oddfellows, Methodists, and Masons--all of whom were on Mencken's list to poke fun at (pp. 324-5). The Menace claimed to have evidence that the Vatican was responsible for World War I (p. 328), among other catastrophic events. Milburn quotes a remarkable statement from this newspaper, just to give a sample of its ideology--"'The world has witnessed one Perfect Klansman. His name is Jesus'" (p. 344).

"Appeal to Reason" is a companion piece for "Menace." The Appeal to Reason was a great socialist weekly which set the vogue for muckraking in America, according to Milburn (American Mercury, July 1931, p. 359). The Jungle by Upton Sinclair was published in it serially (p. 360); Eugene V. Debs wrote some very "incendiary" prose for it (p. 366). The Appeal to Reason finally passed away in 1922; its heyday was 1912 (p. 371).

Though these articles are perhaps largely reflections of Mencken's prejudices, they certainly do not disagree with the impression one has of Milburn. Milburn, too, was obviously rather liberal politically. "Mr. Hoover's Stalking Horse" (American Mercury, July 1932) probably revealed more of Mencken than of Milburn, but like the two above articles, this piece exemplifies

Milburn's skills as a journalistic writer. As in his stories, Milburn does not comment on the goodness or badness of a politician, but the details he uses make his sympathies clear. "Mr. Hoover's Stalking Horse" is about Patrick Jay Hurley, the first Oklahoman to be in the President's cabinet. Milburn explains that Hoover needed a "stalking-horse whose majestic physical appearance would be enough to decoy the country's vanishing illusions (p. 264). Angoff says in his book A Portrait from Memory that Hoover was especially offensive to Mencken because Hoover called Prohibition a "noble experiment" when, as Mencken said, "'Even such a swine knows that civilization and liquor go together'" (p. 131).

About this time (1931-32), between books, Milburn wrote "The Statesmanship of Mr. Garner" (Harper's, November 1932, pp. 669-82) about Roosevelt's first vice president; with statesmanship as part of Milburn's title, predictably, Garner's statesmanship is shown to be neglible. Milburn also wrote some articles about Oklahoma's most illustrious governor, William "Alfalfa Bill" Murray, using Murray's various nicknames for titles, "Bolivia Bill" (Vanity Fair, May 1932, p. 25, 72), making reference to the colony of farmers Murray took to Bolivia in the late 1920's, coming back "busted," and "Sage of Tishomingo" in American Mercury, reflecting Alfalfa Bill's homegrown variety of

knowledge about almost everything. The "Sage" article traces closely Murray's race for governor. Both Milburn's skills in description, showing Murray as a "stooped, greying man who wore shaggy, drooping moustaches and a cheap wrinkled suit" (p. 12), and in satire, are used in this American Mercury article. Consider, for example, the inestimable satire in the fact that, reported by Milburn, the rustics were all for Alfalfa Bill, though there was some talk of a man named Murray (p. 14).

"Oklahoma the OK State" appeared in Vanity Fair (January 1933, p. 37, 56) and also contains many facts about William Murray. If anyone was qualified to speak of Oklahoma at that time, Milburn was, and the article is enlightening. He chronicles the early governors of Oklahoma, all of whom were either impeached or threatened with impeachment (p. 37). Milburn talks about fraternity membership as a status symbol, and about how the Indians were driven out of the state by "covetous crackers" (p. 37). Of course, he also speaks of bootleggers and bankrobbers, two old Oklahoma favorites, in this piece. Milburn's attitude toward the state is ambivalent, but this makes for excellent satire. He uses the pecularities in his state to good purpose in his stories.

No More Trumpets and Other Stories

Milburn was no doubt under the influence of H. L. Mencken when writing the more fully-developed short stories published in 1933 called No More Trumpets and Other Stories (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., Inc.). Although it is necessary that one actually read the stories in Milburn's work and compare them with stories by other Mencken favorites before making such a broad statement, it is clear that many reviewers felt Milburn to be part of the Mencken "school" of thought. The comparisons made between Milburn and these others (Sinclair Lewis and Ring Lardner, mainly) in the reviews help one to see this phase of Milburn's career in perspective.

Certainly, now and again one sees a thread of Ring Lardner in "Pilgrim's Progress" (p. 158), and of Sinclair Lewis in the Rotary stories, "The Apostate" (p. 38), and "A Pretty Cute Little Stunt" (p. 137); however, Milburn does not stray much from what he knows. Perhaps it took someone of Mencken's enthusiasms and prejudices to accept the rather unusual sketches of Oklahoma Town with such unabashed glee.

However No More Trumpets came about, it shows evidence of a maturing George Milburn. He was twenty-seven at the time! The reviewer for Nation (4 October

1933), Robert Liddell Lowe, praises the stories for their "lean and acrimonious prose" and says that they have at their source "ironic bitterness" (p. 386). One complaint he has is that Milburn tends to caricature and that he insists too frequently on acid endings (p. 386). It might be argued that both make for good satire, however.

Robert Cantwell, reviewing No More Trumpets for New Republic (18 October 1933), helps to place Milburn in the then contemporary scene. Cantwell mentions the three writers Milburn is often compared to and says that Milburn doesn't write with aimless sarcasm like Mencken, or undiscriminating irony, like Lardner, or sentimentality, like Sinclair Lewis, but with surgical precision, recording the customs of the people (p. 285). The New York Times Book Review says that Milburn is one of the more promising of the "Lewis-Lardner" school of satire (24 September 1933, p. 8). Similarities noted by the reviewer include the fact that Milburn's characters convict themselves out of their own mouths, like Lewis's, and that Milburn "eschews commentary," like Lardner (p. 8).

Perhaps the most enthusiastic beginning to any review of No More Trumpets is that by William Rosby in Saturday Review of Literature (30 September 1933). "Oklahoma is going to matter in American literature!" (p. 148). The reviewer compares the discovery of

Milburn's first collection of short stories to that of Hemingway's (p. 148). "The Fight at Hendryx's" is worthy to become folklore, he says; Rosby also notes that Milburn doesn't use the "magazine" formula, which, I assume, is the happy ending to gratify reader fantasy (p. 148).

Franklin P. Adams reviews No More Trumpets for New York Herald Tribune Books (24 September 1933). Adams says the stories are utterly American and "unlike anybody else's stories" (p. 8). He says the stories reveal a hatred of the human race, though it is a hatred born of indignation that things and people aren't better than they are (p. 8). Adams says that many of the stories could be first chapters of novels, but that Milburn shouldn't write novels, because he is a first rate short story writer. "Mr. Milburn writes no duds; he has something worth saying in every story" (p. 8).

Many of the reviewers stated their preferences for various stories in No More Trumpets, and several named "Sugar Be Sweet!" (p. 116). In rating the stories, this story of a man who pays cash for his daughter's coffin so he can buy a hundred-pound sack of sugar with the Lucky Moon coupon premiums he receives in the transaction would probably be considered among the best by anyone. The story has something to say about materialism

in American society. "A Student in Economics" (p. 65) is a story in which the details would need to be changed only slightly to bring it up to date, though the fact that it is set in the 1920's lends a charm it might otherwise lack. Though many people have assumed that this story of a hard-pressed college student is autobiographical, Turner reports that Milburn said in a letter to Dr. Lyle Owen at the University of Tulsa that the story reflected the problems his brother Sam was having at the University of Missouri (p. 24). For pure enjoyment, nostalgia, and a little disillusionment, "The Visit to Uncle Jake's" (p. 3), the opening selection of No More Trumpets, is excellent. The contrast between the successful and well-fed Grandfather Beals and his long lost brother Jake, of the Arkansas hill country, is well-described.

Since the state of Israel is now a daily news story, "Biography of a Prophet" (p. 188) comes as something of a shock, since it is about Zionism in the 1920's. Also, in this story, Milburn, through the persona of a college summer student, comments significantly on theories of fiction. His aunt, the narrator says, once told him that "'every person's life, no matter how insignificant it may appear on the surface, is worth a book'" (p. 188). The narrator says that he generally holds the opposite

viewpoint but that "even in the dullest life there is usually some bright episode to be uncovered, lopped out, and set in an interesting tale" (p. 188). He then tells the story of a Jewish dentist's one-man fight against Zionism. About Goldstein, the narrator says, "I was fortunate in knowing him at that time and no other, because I witnessed his crisis. A year or so later no one would have suspected that anything had ever happened to ruffle the mediocrity of his existence" (p. 188).

As this remarkable story about Zionism points out, the stories in No More Trumpets are not topically dated. Some of the descriptions of clothing and hairstyles, Paul's "dank pompadour" (p. 262) in "A Position on the Staff," the status of Zionism in "Biography of a Prophet," the "'gen-u-wine rayon silk hose'" (p. 132) auctioned off in "Sugar Be Sweet!" and various mentions of World War I, tell the reader that the stories are set in the late 1920's, but none of the topics has ceased to be of interest in American literature. Some of the angles on the topics have shifted, particularly in the area of race relations, but every day's newspaper tells one that racial prejudice is a controversial contemporary problem. Thus it can be seen that Milburn's third book was one of interest to both readers and reviewers--and one that amazes even now.

Stories, 1934-1935

Although the topic of this paper is style and satire, I wish to add dimension to the paper by mentioning, though necessarily briefly, all of George Milburn's works. Therefore, the stories he wrote from 1934-1935 should be examined because they lend light to other, later, works. Three Milburn stories were published in these years, "All My Love" (Esquire, February 1934), "By Moon Light" (Collier's, 15 June 1935), and "Honey Boy" (Collier's, 10 March 1934). "All My Love"[4] refers to the closing words of a telegram. It is a long story, well-developed, and would not have been out of place in No More Trumpets. The story of a rather pathetic young tough, Red, whose mother is dying of tuberculosis in Santa Fé and a college kid, Bob, who is trying to get back to Tulsa from New York, "All My Love" also draws upon the hobo lore Milburn learned while editing his book of hobo songs. When the two are delayed en route, Bob writes the telegram to Red's mother, and because Bob was inspired to add the simple "All my love" to make a seven-word telegram into the allowed ten, it becomes apparent that Red will now do anything for Bob,

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[4] Stories for Men, ed. by Charles Grayson (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1944). The story was anthologized in this work, and future page references are to it, rather than to Esquire.

up to and including giving his life (p. 325). When Red is caught by a yard dick as he and Bob try to catch a freight, after being conned out of their cross-country ride, Bob repays Red's loyalty. "'Hell, he wasn't no friend of mine,' the college boy said, swaggering, 'I never saw him in my life until seven o'clock, day-before-yesterday morning'" (p. 327). So much for the loyalty of college boys.

"By Moon Light" and "Honey Boy" are reminiscent of the sketches in Oklahoma Town. H. C. Moon, an aged oil man, was almost the victim of a swindler who claimed to be the son of Eb Moon, a distant relative who had once stolen H. C.'s girl; the swindler doesn't get away with anything, of course, because who'd trust someone whose father had played such a lowdown trick? (p. 15). "Honey Boy" is about a bank robber, Honey Boy Dale, evidently based on the legendary Pretty Boy Floyd. Honey Boy has allegedly been shot by his best friend and his face ruined; only his mother can identify the body (p. 24). The story is really about her; the old lady shows her dignity and courage. She examines the body without a tear and says that it can't be her son. Honey Boy had a strawberry birthmark, not on this body. But when she is alone at home, she says, "'Honey Boy! Oh my Honey Boy--it was all I could do . . .'" (p. 24).

Catalogue

As good as the stories in No More Trumpets are, Catalogue (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., Inc., 1936), Milburn's first and best novel, was probably necessary for his acceptance as a serious writer. George Sessions Perry says in his Roundup Time that spots in Catalogue are "apt to set a person of normal risibilities laughing so violently as to strain his viscera dangerously near to the breaking point" (p. 21). But Catalogue has serious parts too, and it is this combination that makes it a book of worth.

Catalogue was reviewed widely. The main impression one receives upon reading these reviews is that everyone was looking forward to Milburn's first novel and that many were a bit disappointed. Samuel Sillen (Nation, 17 October 1936) says the book is a kind of satirical Winesburg, Ohio, a prose Spoon River Anthology (p. 454), but he goes on to say that the characters are two-dimensional, that the work marks "no real stride" in Milburn's development (p. 455). Hamilton Basso, in New Republic (7 October 1936) helps to delineate Milburn's purpose, by saying that the catalogue device helps to integrate the scattered life of the community into a whole (p. 259). He makes the point, however, that

Milburn knows too many literary tricks and that the action works out too neatly (p. 260).

Helen McAfee in Yale Review (Autumn 1936) says that though the catalogue device provides fun and some satire, on the whole it limits the scope of the novel (p. x). Time (14 September 1936) writes it off as a short episodic bit of Americana with a thin thread of narrative (p. 90). Mark Van Doren (Southern Review, July 1937-April 1938) finds the essence of the novel to be bound up in the word "hick"--he finds the characters to be "snorting, guffawing, blaspheming clowns who derive from Sinclair Lewis" (p. 171).

Carl Van Doren, on the other hand, reviewing for the New York Herald Tribune Books (13 September 1936) rather liked Catalogue. He said that the mail-order catalogue, as we know it, would be a valuable historical tool. He says that the incidents are "so convincing that they seem to have been reported, not invented" (p. 7). Howard Mumford Jones in the Saturday Review of Literature (12 September 1936) perhaps sums up the general feeling best. "Mr. Milburn's gift for portraiture and his sympathetic insight into the lives which have interested him make me a little sorry that he has not taken the time to write a more penetrating novel" (p. 13).

The New York Times Book Review (20 September 1936) speculates that it doesn't take Milburn much time to knock these characters and stories off to perfection (p. 6). Fred T. Marsh, the reviewer, calls it a brilliant example of the Mencken school of Americana which gives one a few hours of vulgar and hilarious entertainment which ultimately has a curiously sobering effect (p. 6). The Christian Century makes a point mentioned also in other reviews, that with all the originality of most of the characters, it is surprising to find Milburn "introducing the fishy-eyed banker of melodrama who holds a whip hand over the town and even deprives a cripple of his wheelchair to satisfy a fiendish revenge" (p. 1394).

Steven Turner treats Catalogue rather fully in his George Milburn since the novel is definitely set in the Southwest. Turner says that Milburn revisits Oklahoma with "something of a vengeance" (p. 25). Turner comments on the catalogue device, saying that "these quotations function in ironic, symbolic, or semi-expository fashion" (p. 25). Turner says that the language of the catalogue seems to "reinforce strongly the thematic irony of people searching beyond themselves and the sterility of their environment toward a contentment to be found only in a romanticized land of material dreams" (p. 26).

Turner's summary of Catalogue is excellent; actually, summarizing the book in a few pages is an artistic feat in itself since the book has so many characters and so much action. Most of the reviewers called the lynching of Sylvester Merrick inevitable, and perhaps at that time it was, in fiction, at any rate, and perhaps in real life also. Turner finished his analysis with a conclusion hard to deny. "Indeed, although the tales of Oklahoma Town had contained many unflattering portraits, Catalogue most severely indicts the small-town Oklahomans, a group so malleable that their opinions may be shaped by such men as banker Winston, newsman Ledbetter, and even poor-white C. R. Butts" (p. 31).

My own estimation of Catalogue does not differ greatly from that of the critics. The style, which will be discussed more fully later in the paper, does not have quite the remarkable flow of words and unerring accuracy of description one sees in earlier works. Although the inclusion of the lynching seemed trite to the reviewers, I was somewhat surprised that Blacks figured in the work at all--or would have been had I not read Oklahoma Town and No More Trumpets first. And I found the portrait of "Double S Winston" rather enchanting, perhaps because in modern fiction no one would dare introduce such a stereotyped character. Actually, such sterotyping can

be defended on the grounds that Milburn is a satirist and must deal with types to make his points. And these "types" often have a firm base in reality. But Catalogue is a bit of a disappointment. Perhaps it is too "regional" to give the feeling of universality a great work must have. Perhaps one needs to see the characters' thoughts and know their motivations, though this is obviously not Milburn's method.

Another point many reviewers made was that the book was really just a few short stories strung together with the catalogue device. As if to give credence to this theory, Milburn did publish several excerpts from the book separately. "The Catalogues" appeared in Harper's (August 1933), "Fiddler's Choice," about Matt Keefer's spending his last cent for a G-string for his fiddle, in Collier's (25 May 1935), "Post Office Flag," about the over-zealous Boy Scout Bill Huggins in Esquire (March 1936), "Uneasy Payments," the delightful sub-plot about Waldo Ledbetter who orders a bike without his father's knowledge and has to find a way to pay for it (one can't help assuming this is Milburn as a child) in Harper's (December 1933), and "The Wish Book" which contains the story of Spike Callahan, his wife, their malformed children, and Spike's murder, in Southern Review (1935). Each is indeed complete in itself.

"The Road to Calamity" and Other Stories

Ten years would pass before Milburn published another novel. In the meantime he wrote a few short stories and articles. Many of these will be categorized later; however, his "The Road to Calamity" (Southern Review, 1936) is significant in that it is said to be one of the few truly autobiographical stories he wrote (Turner, p. 5--according to Mary Milburn, Milburn's second wife). Turner summarizes this briefly. The main character in the story, E. L. Forepaugh, is a writer who has just moved with his wife to the Ozarks so that he can have the peace and leisure to create. On the day of their arrival in the area, he takes a slug of gin at 5:45 A. M., rather a disheartening beginning (p. 64). He contemplates an article "Does Cess Pool Literature Pay Dividends?" (p. 64). This is likely a reference to Catalogue; perhaps he had seen the reviews.

When the reader learns that Forepaugh and his wife will be living on the road to Calamity, a store and sawmill, the direction of the story is clear, as is Milburn's mood (p. 67). The story begins in the spring, and each section shows what happens with the season's changing. The summer brings tourists, rejection slips, and duns (p. 73). And the supply of alcohol has run out;

he drinks from an extract bottle only to learn that it is imitation, with no alcohol (p. 74). Even at this point, however, he sees life poetically. "A soft rain of caterpillars rustled down from the big walnut trees" (p. 74). He reveals his views on writing--"'A story's just like a lottery ticket. All it costs is the work put into it. If it clicks, it's worth several hundred dollars. And if it doesn't click, it's just so much waste paper'" (p. 76).

The fall brings only circulars from the little magazines. Forepaugh feels he can't send them stories; their rejection would be the final degradation (p. 80). After being in this cabin in the Ozarks for several months, he and his wife and daughter decide to drive to Calamity (p. 81). Along the way, he tells them of the lives of the hillbillies they pass, and his wife says she thinks he's been hypnotized by the name of the road, that he's as lazy as the hillbillies he spends his time talking with (p. 84). He agrees, takes them home, and reads "Cinderella" to his daughter, an appropriate story under the circumstances. They decide to return to New York and journalism--another road to calamity, it seems (p. 84).

In 1944 and 1945 three of Milburn's short stories were published in Esquire: "The Sacrifice of Sarah Jo"

(February 1944), "The Cowboy Sang Soprano" (April 1944), and "A Meeting of Minds" (September 1945). Sarah Jo was a hillbilly who decided to do something to aid the war effort--one brother had been killed; another's ship was lost (p. 73). She goes to Springfield, Missouri, to give blood and astonishes the doctor by speaking of her funeral arrangements. "Dr. Chastain, still slow to grasp the full import of her question, peered sharply at her face, and saw that she was in deadly earnest" (p. 161). "The Cowboy Sang Soprano" is another of Milburn's tales about the ironies of life with men among men. The cowboys on the trail ride protected a young greenhorn who didn't know riding herd from sour apples because of his soprano singing voice which kept the herd calm on the trail (p. 59).

"A Meeting of Minds" is rather different from the other two stories; it clearly satirizes Milburn's time as a writer of radio programs. Three adult males become quite excited over the idea of ending a melodramatic radio show with a deathbed scene of a gangster's moll and a highschool boy to be followed by no commercial, thus making radio history (pp. 148-9). They said it was the kind of thing to put "daytime radio in long pants;" Milburn's disgust for such inanities is made clear (p. 149).

Another, and better, article about Oklahoma was printed in the Yale Review in March 1946. It is im-

portant to Milburn's style and satire because it reveals his feelings for his home state, the subject of his best writing. Milburn's method in the article is to show the state as a study in contrasts. In this article called simply "Oklahoma" he says it is land given first to the Indians because it was so useless, then taken away because it was so valuable (p. 516). Once a largely socialist state, Oklahoma at the time of the article considered ownership of Das Kapital to be a criminal offense (p. 517). He says the state was characterized as a Dust Bowl, although Oklahoma has much verdant scenery (p. 517). He cites the irony of the fact that he was denounced for calling Oklahoma "a comic opera state" in an earlier article, whereas the comic opera Oklahoma! was quite popular with all Oklahomans at the present (p. 520). Milburn comments on his own work by saying that the oddities and complexities of the state don't seem as funny to him as they did in the days of his youth, but that no other place in the world offers a more gruesome study of democracy in the raw, nor of "how thoroughly it can be cooked" (p. 526). Perhaps this provides a clue to his later lack of originality in some ways; youth was an important aspect of what he wrote.

Finally, in 1946, he wrote a piece called "Catalogues and Culture" for Good Housekeeping in the April issue, which

reinforces many of the points he makes in his novel Catalogue. He claims that the mail order catalogue has had an effect on American culture to equal the cotton gin, six-shooter, the model-T flivver, and the million dollar movie (p. 181). The article tells a bit of history concerning Mr. Sears and A. Montgomery Ward (pp. 182-3) and ends with the nostalgic remark that the "catalogue should come in the mail each spring and fall just the way it always has, and furnish fascinating reading the year round" (p. 184).

Flannigan's Folly

In 1947, Milburn published another novel, called Flannigan's Folly (New York: Whittlesey House, McGraw-Hill Book Co.). Since this work too is about life in Oklahoma, Steven Turner's George Milburn deals with it fully. Although Turner admits that the story is slight and the characters stereotyped, he says that the wonderful descriptions of Oklahoma farm life and land serve to compensate for other omissions (p. 33). He says that "in Flannigan's Folly Milburn took the time to dwell with a kind of fond nostalgia upon the appearance of the land, the varied methods of cultivating it, and the particular attitudes of people whose existence depended on what the soil brought forth" (p. 33).

A "review" of the reviews will reveal what the book is like, and, of course, the world's opinion of it. The New Yorker (3 May 1947) called it a "sunny little time-killer" and said that "it may make you wonder what became of the originality and the sharp bite that distinguished Milburn's early prose" (p. 102). The New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review (27 April 1947) headed its review, by Thomas Sugrue, "A Dull and Witless Man" (p. 16). And the publication had the poor taste to place a picture of Milburn, now gray-haired at age forty, next to the headline. Sugrue does begin this review, however, with a rather nice tribute to Milburn. "There is an almost physical pleasure to be had from reading George Milburn's prose. It pours like warm sand running through the fingers; it spells out simple, smelly things; it makes an ear for the sound of people talking over back fences, calling across fields, and arguing in barber shops" (p. 16). Sugrue goes on to say that Milburn gets the land and people on paper with wonderful ease, that Milburn's folly is Flannigan--without him the tale might have been worth reading (p. 16).

Having read Flannigan's Folly, one is tempted to point out that Flannigan's lust for land is the main conflict of the book, but it is true that Flannigan is a bit difficult to imagine as being real. Milburn's feelings about

Flannigan are also difficult to ascertain. For the most part, he paints a rather positive picture of the Irishman, though Flannigan is treated in a humorous way, of course. The reader first meets Flannigan on the morning a pig breaks into his house and jumps into bed with him. Milburn describes Flannigan. "He sighed in his sleep. His long, gilt-bristled upper lip stretched flat, his pale lashes squeezed tight, and his mouth clopped slowly" (p. 10).

Flannigan's superstitions are a large part of the book. Apart from realism, these superstitions are an interesting addition and help to motivate much of the action. Flannigan points his horseshoe "ceilingward so that its curve would hold the luck" (p. 12). He says that "on May Day you put a green branch over the door of your byre, and it's a sure warrant your cows will have a good flow of milk the rest of the year" (p. 59).

Though Flannigan claims to be superstitious, his methods of farming could only be called organic. These farming methods serve as the subject of a large part of the satire and irony in the book and will be discussed later. It is not his farming, but his temperament, that defeats Flannigan. The fact that Flannigan loses the widow whose hand and land he desires is not astonishing; it is also no surprise that Joe Griffen wins her, making it

unnecessary for him to buy the land he came to Buried Hatchet, Oklahoma, to purchase. This predictable ending is the most disappointing element of Flannigan's Folly; predicting the ending to Milburn's earlier works would have been impossible. Perhaps the switch was related to the conflict Milburn names in his story "The Road to Calamity." The lily-white literature was what sold, it seemed (Southern Review, 1936, p. 65). Milburn gives the reader the happy ending he desires, but it makes Flannigan's Folly a book easily forgotten.

Articles of the Fifties and Julie

Two articles by Milburn appeared in Nation in 1953. One was called "Monroney of Oklahoma" (8 August 1953) and was political in nature. Subtitled "Bad Medicine for McCarthy," the article shows that Milburn had not changed sides--he was still a liberal after Mencken's heart. "Sex, Sex, Sex, and the World Crisis" (September 19, 1953) contains irony in the title alone. The article is subtitled "Reflections on Kinsey" and tells of a husband and wife who argue over Kinsey's report on women's sexual behavior (p. 230). Worthy to be one of his short stories, the article has a rather "acid" ending; he strangles her while she stabs him with the scissors (p. 231).

Milburn's final effort was Julie (New York: Lion Library, 1956) which was later reissued as Old John's Woman (New York: Pyramid Books, 1960), based on Chaucer's "Miller's Tale." Turner says that even though there is a "genuine quality to the earthy humor in several places, the book itself contains nothing that would enhance the reputation of Milburn" (pp. 35-6). Arguing with this conclusion is difficult; however, it is interesting to note how ingeniously Milburn has transplanted Chaucer's characters, their actions, and in many cases, their actual words. In "The Miller's Tale," Chaucer's Alison, after being indecorously grabbed by "hende Nicholas," reacts thus. "And she sproong as a colt dooth in the trave/ And with hir heed she wryed faste away."[5]

Milburn's version--"Just then she shoved him away with both arms and gave a leap like a colt when it has been put in a trave to be shod for the first time. She jerked her head away" (Old John's Woman is the version used throughout, p. 37).

The character Absalom is almost identical to Chaucer's "Absolon." After the misplaced kiss, we see Absolon "who rubbeth now, who froteth now his lippes/ With dust, with

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[5] "The Canterbury Tales," The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer ed. by F. N. Robinson, 2nd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961), p. 49, ll. 3282-3. Further references will be noted by line number and page number of this work.

sond, with straw, with clooth, with chippes" (p. 54, ll. 3447-48). Milburn's version reads, "He reached down and picked up a handful of dust and began scrubbing his lips. He went over and grabbed up a clump of dry grass and rubbed his mouth with that too . . ." (p. 179). "Weeping like a whipped child, he made his way along the footpath, stripping off willow leaves to wipe his mouth as he went" (p. 180). The resemblance is obvious; the amazing fact is that Milburn's words still "fit" in 1960.

James T. Bratcher and Nicolai von Kreisler in "The Popularity of the Miller's Tale" (Southern Folklore Quarterly 35 [December 1971]) say that Milburn's indebtedness to Chaucer is "wholesale" (p. 334). This article does not condemn Milburn for lifting the story from Chaucer; their point is that this type of plot suspension, by which one forgets Old John and the Flood to concentrate on Julie and Dexter's amorous scene and Absalom's revenge, is a device that makes the story popular in the telling and retelling. Bratcher and von Kreisler mention two other extant versions of the tale, concluding that these oral versions, plus Old John's Woman, say something about audience psychology. They feel that this accounts for the lasting popularity of Chaucer's most humorous work (p. 335).

For purposes of this paper, it is interesting to note that these authors mention the "apparent novelistic success" of Old John's Woman, though one might question such a statement at present. Bratcher and von Kreisler do mention that Milburn's version was modernized with an eye for the taste of the mass audience, making capital of all possibilities for sexual titillation (p. 334). However, it is ironic that Milburn's work is not as racy as Chaucer's. Of course, the book was written in 1956, not 1976. Apparently, Milburn didn't want to write anything offensive at that point, though many of his earlier stories might have been considered so by some. Perhaps this is evidence that he had changed, that the failure of his writing to earn him a good living had altered his outlook.

STYLE

Every writer, of course, has strengths and weaknesses. A recitation of the list of George Milburn's works and a summary of the reviews of his books do not give a complete picture of his accomplishments in literature. Turner says that "many of the parts . . . seem more impressive than the whole" (p. 36). Milburn's style is definitely one of his excellences and therefore deserves special attention. Style is included as a major part of this paper because of the simplicity and ease with which he describes characters and events. Milburn's manner of writing is, along with satire, the most memorable aspect of his work. In the material to follow, I will give examples of his various stylistic achievements as I see them. Especially in Milburn's work, it is not enough to name the subjects and settings he wrote about; a great deal of the reader's interest is in how he expresses his creativity. His simple and delightful way of putting things, the low-key quality of his delivery, and his matter of fact method of presenting astounding situations--all make him a writer no one should omit reading.

Understatement

As noted above, Milburn is able to present some rather amazing occurrences in a rather matter of fact way, resulting in some masterpieces of understatement. The story "A Contortionist's Wife" in Oklahoma Town has a fresh example of such a simple nature that one almost misses it as an instance of understatement. "Meantime, it got around town that Mrs. Zerko was chasing in to the Economy Drug Store and buying a pack of Camels nearly every day. Everyone was pretty sure that she was a woman who smoked" (pp. 12-13). "Captain Choate" provides a more obvious example of Milburn's skill in this area. Speaking of the Russian Trotski and the speculation that Trotski had lived in Oklahoma at one time, Captain Choate says that of course he knew the revolutionary--"Caused the Rooshun revolution and killed God knows how many people" (Oklahoma Town, p. 128).

Also from Oklahoma Town, "Those Seagrave Boys" contains a classic and shocking example of Milburn's skill in understating. Briefly, Ote, the oldest son, had split his sweetheart's head in two with a cotton hoe (p. 190), Elzy, the second boy, had assaulted a sixteen year old girl at a Holy Roller meeting (p. 191), and Bert, the baby, had stuck a match to a boy's celluloid collar (p. 192). However, with good humor and without conster-

nation, Old Man Seagrave, who made the best apricot brandy in the county (p. 186), explains about his boys. "I tell you, Judge, if anybody had worked hard bringing up a passel of boys, learning them to fear God and drink pure liquor instead of this rot-gut like some of them is selling nowdays, I reckon they'd understand about them boys of mine. Them boys ain't mean boys, Judge. They're just playful" (p. 192).

Milburn reaches the pinnacle of understatement, if such a blatantly mixed metaphor may be allowed, in "The Fight at Hendryx's" in No More Trumpets. Old Man Peck is the narrator; he is "stolid and humorless" (p. 50). Such a storyteller presents understatement most effectively. After Monroe Hayes had cut Merryweather's throat from ear to ear, Peck observes, "Well, sir, I swan, you'd be surprised to see how much a big stout man like that there Merryweather would bleed. He slouched down there in his tracks and the blood run down that corn row for twenty steps or more" (p. 59). Old Man Hendryx tried to save the party by saying there was "no use to let a little murderin' like that bust up a good time" (p. 59).

Description

Milburn was able to describe his characters' physical appearances and their actions with extreme accuracy of detail and with an economy of words. His descriptions of scenery employ fresh and unusual metaphors. The following subtopics explore this aspect of Milburn's style.

Physical appearance

Milburn could often compress into one sentence enough details about a character's physical appearance that one might recognize the character on the street. He had to be especially good at this in Oklahoma Town since the stories are too short for pages of description. "A Contortionist's Wife" is described as "small and pretty, with startled brown eyes and an indiscriminate smile" (p. 11). The Crutchfields' children came to school with "matter beaded eyes," their clothes giving off the odor of "rancid bacon grease" (p. 17). "Looie McKindricks" has eyes "bathed in rheum" and a mouth "sunken and twisted like an old man's" and "a huge head covered with a mat of red hair" (p. 28). The girl Looie courts is Lulu Sampler; "Lulu was a big, red-faced girl with breasts like melons and a lap like an over-stuffed rocker" (p. 28).

To show that August Kunkel, the atheist shoemaker in "God Smote a Shoemaker" is a very strong man, Milburn says he had a "neck like a tree trunk" (p. 42); and below this one noticed "the mountainous curve of his great shoulders" (p. 42). "Iron Filigree" describes Vince Blanc, the village blacksmith, in what is a fairly stereotyped but effective manner; Vince is "a scrawny little Frenchman with a sallow complexion" and a "little tuft of hair growing out from his lower lip" (p. 67). Not all of Milburn's characters in Oklahoma Town are ugly; Olla Obenchain in "The Butcher, The Baker--" is probably the most beautiful. Olla is on the train, leaving home because her father and fiancé disapproved of her bobbed hair--"She was lovely there with her pale face turned up and her breasts drawn taut, lying back in the dim, mellow, half-light of the day-coach's oil lamps" (p. 81).

"Shorty Kilgore" always had such an "expression around his mouth that you were surprised when words came out of it instead of shrill monkey whistles" (p. 86). "Muncy Morgan" was another strong man; the muscles on his back "put you in mind of the wind moving across prairie grass" (p. 136). "Delmer Dilbeck" was the stingiest man in Milburn's Oklahoma Town; he was a "bald stringy man with moles and rimless-eyeglasses" (p. 153).

"Mrs. Hopkins" was an eccentric old lady who "went around dressed like the girl on a 1910 calendar" and "wore such huge hats that her head bobbled when she walked" (p. 171). Photographer Orville Burke is definitely a ladies' man with "his broad, smiling mouth and glossy black hair roached up in a high wave above his brow" ("The Nude Waitress," p. 177).

Since No More Trumpets and Other Stories contains more fully developed stories, it is not surprising that the character descriptions also tend to be more elaborate. A few examples will suffice to make the point that Milburn's descriptions in this work are excellent. "The Visit to Uncle Jake's" shows Grandfather Beals driving his flivver, "a droll figure, jouncing over the ruts with his legs akimbo, crooked up on each side of the steering wheel" (p. 5). The young bum in "Heel, Toe, and A 1, 2, 3, 4," Milburn's first story not set in Oklahoma, is described with great detail. "His back was twisted and he held his elbows out from his sides as if he had boils in both armpits" (p. 25). "His marmoset's face was broad and pleasant, but one of his eyelids drooped halfway shut. His other eye was as black and lively as a beetle" (p. 25).

Slight touches in "A Student in Economics" reveal a rather vivid picture of the smug, collegiate type,

Aubrey Carson, the class president, is pictured as having a "lean, florid face," a "marcelled taffy pompadour," and a "creased tailored suit" (p. 83). Sorority girls probably haven't changed much; Milburn pictures them, as they enter the Wigwam, where Charlie Wingate works, "giggling and talking in gasps and screams, their fur coats clutched over their sleeping pajamas" (p. 86).

The portrayal of Miss Manchester, the schoolteacher in "Revenge," is revealing. "She was a neat, starched woman, with a square-tipped pink nose and an upper lip too short to cover her teeth" (p. 97). "Sugar Be Sweet!" shows the dying Marion Whalen as "so fair, so bloodless, and beautiful" (p. 118). "Against her face's cool, transparent whiteness lay the soft crimson braces of her lips" (p. 119). Marion's father, Walter Whalen, in contrast, "was a large man, large in body, large in spirit too . . . Even his paunch, sweeping down from his lower ribs in a magnificent cataract of flesh, was there to buttress his shoulders" (p. 121). Mrs. Whalen, his wife, is described as a "noiseless, mousy woman who had not had an independent thought in years" (p. 129).

"The Drummer's Shoes" was felt by some reviewers to be rather inconsequential; however, one would not want to miss the picture of Lois Scheafer as a farm girl with "satchel cheeks and a throat full of braying laughter" (p. 184).

Milburn's "Biography of a Prophet" shows the painless dentist from Houston, Texas, Goldstein, as a "swart man with black hair merging into baldness and mild brown eyes behind rimless spectacles" (p. 189).

"Love Song" is rich with physical descriptions. "Rickets left Virgil a bandy-legged, dish-faced youngster with great, protruding ears and a thin mat of colorless hair" (p. 245). When washing dishes at the Broadway Café his "pinched, skinned-rabbit face gleamed above the tubs, as red as the chilli scum on the dishwater" (p. 245). Minnie Flynn, the girl he eventually married, was a "dumpy, thick-ankled farm girl, with gopher cheeks, but fresh and even in her ill-fitting store dress, not at all unattractive" (p. 248).

Alliteration abounds in the phrase describing one of Paul's fellow reporters in "A Position on the Staff." Milburn writes that "a pretty girl with podgy ankles plopped a large purse down on a nearby desk" (p. 271). In the same story, the reader is treated to an accurate-sounding description of the madame who is suing a butcher for breach of promise; she is shown as a "slattern wearing a pink boudoir cap and a dingy bathrobe," with a belly "round as a friar's" (pp. 216-17). Twila Jean Frisbee, also a character in "A Position on the Staff," an attempted suicide, was a pretty girl; the "splotches of orange rouge

on her cheeks and the two pinkish acid burns trailing down the corner of her mouth gave her pallid face a curious clownish appearance" (p. 278). Mr. Lytle, Paul's managing editor, had a "spanked-bottom face" (p. 281).

Claude's brother-in-law in "No More Trumpets" appears as a "sleek young man with black hair pasted down so flat that it seemed to be enameled on his skull" (p. 301). Claude's brother Jim, without his shirt, stands "as white and glistening as an onion" (p. 304). Claude's first date after being released from prison is a girl with "hair the color of corn tassel, . . . eyes . . . round and bulging, . . . lips . . . painted into a pucker" (p. 311).

The above examples of Milburn's descriptive powers illustrate the economy with which he could present vivid pictures of his characters. Catalogue also provides excellent examples; however, for economy's sake, I will mention only one. The Widow Holcombe is a prime example. We first see her through Slemmons, the postman's, eyes, coming down the walk, "her pink kimono parting at her plump bare ankles . . . a large, handsome woman with ample flesh curving smooth and warm under a silken sheath. The unkind morning light traced fine wrinkles at the corners of her dark, heavy-browed eyes and a pad sagged under her chin" (p. 40). Catalogue actually contains more action than description, though Milburn wrote nothing

without these concise and accurate portrayals. And, of course, such a physical portrayal suggests many things about the Widow Holcombe; it is not merely a visual description.

Human actions

Human actions are sometimes difficult to portray accurately, but here again Milburn excels. An avalanche of examples is not necessary to make the point; however, several stand out clearly in his works. Probably the best example is that of Fivefinger Earp, from Catalogue, a one-armed man, rolling a cigarette:

> Fivefinger reached into the pocket of his hickory shirt and got out a sack of Bull Durham. He flicked a cigarette paper off the pad, creased it with his thumb and forefinger, and opened the sack with his teeth. Holding the tobacco sack in the crotch of his half-arm, he jiggled it, filling the paper trough with dry flakes. He rolled a cigarette with a snapping motion of his thumb and forefinger, licked it, and held it straight up while he caught the round pasteboard tab on the yellow drawstring between his lips. He pulled the tobacco sack shut and tucked his chin to drop it down into his shirt pocket. He felt along his hat band for a match (pp. 6-7).

Even so simple an occasion as eating breakfast sounds colorful in Milburn's words. The following is from Flannigan's Folly. "Flannigan absently took up the shaker and sprinkled a little more nutmeg on his bowl of curds and whey. He larded a slice of cottony baker's bread with sorghum and folded it neatly and stuffed it

into his mouth. As his stubbled jaws moved in rhythm, he poured black tea into the cracked saucer, blew on it, and drank with a long loud sup" (p. 16).

No More Trumpets also provides notable examples of human actions. Steve Fowler, ace reporter in "A Position on the Staff" is about to stab Mr. Lytle, the managing editor, with a pair of scissors, for accusing Fowler of causing a race riot with his inflammatory stories; Fowler "pulled himself along the table edge as slowly and horribly as a legless man" (p. 288). Goldstein, in "Biography of a Prophet" from the same collection, climaxed his anti-Zionist speech with "'The Arabs will cut your throats!'" and he "would draw a stubby index finger across his own distended throat two or three times very rapidly, making the while a series of sharp little sibilants by sucking his breath through his teeth" (p. 195). Finally, and perhaps a bit anti-climactically, one sees Walter Whalen of "Sugar Be Sweet!" after his heavy noon meal, as he "drew in his chin with little jerks to suppress the gases that rose in his throat" (p. 122).

Metaphor and scene

Freshmen composition instructors often emphasize creative use of verbs, and Milburn's prose could serve as an excellent example. Often, of course, these verbs

are used as parts of metaphors; thus, the following examples are doubly useful. In "Heel, Toe, and A 1, 2, 3, 4" (No More Trumpets), a man is in a basement typing jokes, as Milburn did when he was living in Chicago (Turner, p. 3). "The types did a tap dance on the platen and the words marched across the page . . ." (p. 23). "White Meat" (No More Trumpets) is replete with original verbs and metaphors. On the first page of the story alone, one reads that "where the pine crest really was, carded clouds browsed on the ridge like sleepy fowls. Long black lines of traffic fried continuously over the concrete at the foot of the barren slope, and sometimes an outboard motor moved a dab of frosting across the cool bright surface of the lake" (p. 207).

Two descriptions of the sun stand out metaphorically in Milburn's work. In "The Visit to Uncle Jake's," the narrator says that "we were in the sanded hills when the sun, like a bloody thumb, came poking up through the mist wreaths" (p. 10, No More Trumpets). "All My Love," anthologized in Stories for Men, has an equally memorable comparison. "Far down a shadowed cross street the early sun floated up, pale as a poached egg behind the mist" (p. 318).

Although the depiction of pure scenery was not notable in Milburn's earlier works, Flannigan's Folly contains this

lovely scene of Flannigan and the Widow Pilgrim's son on their way to go fishing.

> The air was heady with the smell of wild roses and curing alfalfa and bruised moss and strawberries melting on the vine. Their footfalls were muffled by a damp brown mat of last year's leaves. The sunfreckled green silence was only deepened by bee drone and bird twitter and the far-off thrum of a woodpecker and a silken sough through the topmost branches and the purl of the streams beyond. Ferns and trumpet vines swished against their legs as they passed (p. 128).

Dialogue

Many reviewers pointed out that Milburn was true to the speech patterns of Oklahoma in his work. He was also good at others. The story "Indian Steve" from Oklahoma Town contains an example of Oklahoma Indian dialect. When asked how he caught some catfish, Indian Steve said, "Easy, . . . I throwed my eye on her, and he come right up to the top. Then I pick um up off'n the water" (p. 184). Red, in "All My Love" provides an example of substandard New Yorkese, "Poisonly, I wanta get dere just as quick as I can. But don't go takin' no long chances . . . Unnuhstand?" (p. 319, Stories for Men). Herman Gutterman's speech in Catalogue about his wife's getting out of jail is a typical example of Milburn's rural Oklahoma dialect.

> "It shore don't seem like yestiddy to me, Mr. Slemmons. It seems like six year to me since the shiruff ketched Bessie. Six long months

> in the county jail, Mr. Slemmons. I kept tellin' Bessie she'd better be more particular about who she sold to, but she wouldn't mind. Then the shiruff got that middle Tompkins boy to come over here that afternoon last March when I was off from home, and they nabbed Bessie jist as she set him out a quart. . . .Bessie has always been a good wife to me, but I jist never could learn her who to trust and who to suspicion (p. 43).

Accuracy

Milburn can often condense the essentials of a story into one sentence. "Sugar Be Sweet!" is a lovely example and also an ironic one. "Spring was a soft green cloud hovering over the willow tree in the corner of the Whalen's front yard the day that Marion died" (p. 116, No More Trumpets). The last sentence of "The Nigger Lover" in Oklahoma Town acquires almost symbolic significance. "Those who picked up the bodies that afternoon found John Parnell lying face down with his lips against the cheek of Black Mamie, the nigger harlot" (p. 10). And Mabel Barclay, of Oklahoma Town, who loved the movies, on the night her husband died, talked the movie theater manager into holding over the thirteenth installment of "The House of Hate," and as others sat with her dead husband to keep the cats away, "The could hear Mabel Barclay in the kitchen chinking nickels and dimes out of her china pig" (pp. 114-115).

SATIRE

George Milburn's contribution to satiric literature is unique. Although his topics for satire--such as Rotary baiting, race relations, evangelistic religions--are also satirized by other writers of the day, it is in Milburn's fresh way of seeing people and their reactions to situations they find themselves in that distinguishes his work from other satiric literature of the time. Milburn finds mankind deficient in many ways, but his satire is not especially malicious. The main impression is one of humor, although some of his topics are very serious. George Milburn makes fun of most of his characters, and clearly says that people are as naive, ignorant, cruel, or greedy as he portrays them to be, but he manages to avoid viciousness in his own look at them.

Although the following sections containing examples of some of the aspects of Milburn's subjects for satire may appear to be a bit of a hodge-podge, I trust that an over-all concept of his satirical talents will emerge. It is the human reaction to the topic that Milburn makes the reader see, whether this Oklahoman is writing about a specific topic or a particular human weakness or hypocrisy. I will discuss the stories in Oklahoma Town and No More Trumpets together, since I think they offer the most excellent examples of his satirical achievements.

The satire in his other books--Catalogue, Flannigan's Folly, and Old John's Woman--will be discussed separately, using the base set up in the major discussion to follow on Oklahoma Town and No More Trumpets.

Blacks and Whites

George Milburn's concern for the plight of Blacks in Oklahoma was quite serious. He shows them being punished unjustly for various minor offenses; he shows the deference Blacks were forced to show to whites. The beginning selection of Oklahoma Town, "The Nigger Lover," portrays a white lawyer who winds up giving his life for the legal rights of the Blacks in the town. "Willie Chalmers" is saved by a "nigger farmer" who carries Willie's bleeding body to the M. K. T. Station to be sent to a hospital in Muskogee (p. 36). Willie's legs have been mangled by dangerous equipment in his father's cotton gin; however, when the farmer returns to sell his load of cotton, now soaked with Willie's blood, Old Man Chalmers says, "'I don't care if it's blood from Jesus Christ. . . . It's done ruint your load of cotton. Drive off them scales. There's another load waiting to get weighed'" (p. 37). "The Nigger Doctor" in Oklahoma Town cures more people than the white doctor and even had the whites coming to him during the flu epidemic of World War I. But, when

the Black Dr. Johnston attempts to register to vote and gives an eloquent and accurate interpretation of the Preamble as part of this fruitless effort and has the audacity to say his understanding is better than that of an illiterate white member of the election board's, Dr. Johnston has an ink-well hurled at him (p. 77). The only Republican on the board, a woman, voices the reader's feelings. "'A. P. Smith, you make me ashamed of being white!'" (p. 77).

The most shocking example of the white man's treatment of the Black occurs in a story not included in Oklahoma Town, though written at the same time, "Pete Williams" ("Oklahoma Opera," Folk-Say I, p. 115). Pete Williams was a "nigger of the old South," servile with white chop whiskers that made his face look like "a fancy chocolate pie frosted with curliques of whipped cream" (p. 116). Someone had given Pete an old silk tophat, which he always took off when bowing to the white ladies he met--after getting off the sidewalk, of course. Ace Holliday liked to knock Pete's hat off and kick it down the street (p. 115). One day there was a race riot in the town and six whites were killed. The whites then opened fire with buckshot and some caught Pete Williams in the neck, nearly severing it (p. 116). Ace Holliday hacked it the rest of the way off and went down the street, "kicking the head

before him" (p. 116). Turner attributes the story's omission from Oklahoma Town to "editorial squeamishness" (George Milburn, p. 31), and he is probably right. If one views this scene as a serious symbol, and I am sure that Milburn intended it to be one, the comment on Black-White relations is devastating.

In No More Trumpets, Milburn presents his most elaborate story on the theme of Blacks in American society at the time he was writing. The title "White Meat" (p. 207) has at least one ironic and one literal meaning, which become plain upon reading the story. Mrs. Nettleton is a Southern lady who has been "reduced" and runs a boarding house in Lake Triad, New York (p. 207). She blatantly and unfeelingly hates the Black race; her after-dinner conversation consists, for example, of "describing a particularly luscious lynching that she said she once had the pleasure of attending in Georgia" (p. 208). She said that she had gone "just for a lark"--such indifference to suffering and the lightness with which Milburn states it make the coming ironical revelation all the more potent. When Mrs. Nettleton's two lovely and well-mannered daughters leave in disgust over such diatribes, the reader eventually learns the truth, that "'That low down Nettleton tribe was paht niggah!'" (p. 220). The guests were "as frightened and

embarrassed by her revelation as they would have been if she had stripped off her clothing" (p. 200). Milburn excels in describing reactions to such events as these, but one hardly feels sympathy for Mrs. Nettleton--only amazement. The end of it all is that the boarders now have their "white meat" they suspected Mrs. Nettleton and her daughters of eating, but--"There was really nothing left to talk about" (p. 221).

Bigots

Although somewhat preoccupied with Black-White relations, Milburn reveals other examples of bigotry. "Hate" (American Mercury, November 1929, p. 261) portrays an individual who is obsessed with hatred for all of his fellow beings. The story is also rather gruesome. Jeff Binkley's nose had been eaten off by an ulcer and, when he didn't wear his black velvet blind, one could see back into his head (p. 261). The irony is that a man so handicapped should feel such hatred for others. Jeff felt compelled to voice his hatred no matter what the personal hardship. He was sick in bed, dying, when he heard of the Sacco and Vanzetti trial; he got up and went downtown to make his opinion known (p. 262). Speaking in "ghastly, muffled tones" he said he would have murdered "them dagos" seven years ago (p. 262). Though "Hate" did

not appear in Oklahoma Town, it was included with several other stories from the collection in American Mercury; "Hate" is therefore being discussed with the other stories from Oklahoma Town.

"The Crutchfields" manages to make bigotry humorous, or ridiculous at least. Old Man Crutchfield, after seeing his daughter dressed in furs after marrying the owner of the Acropolis Cafe in Tulsa (p. 19) says, "'I've disowned Velmy. . . . Any woman who can so fur forget herself to marry a goddam Greek ain't fitten to be no daughter of mine'" (p. 21).

The Greedy

Greed is a topic almost universally satirized, and Milburn mixes greed often with other human weaknesses. The best pure example of this is in Oklahoma Town; the story is "Iron Filigree." This story is about a blacksmith's widow who died ("Mrs. Blanc's strange malady caused her to grow larger and larger," p. 70) and left all her money to finish the iron scrollwork her husband had started on the jail (p. 71), rather than to the two families who fought to get into her good graces and will to the extent that each ordered her the finest coffin money could buy, even before her death. The rather just irony was that one family ordered too soon; the

coffin "was far too small" (p. 71). On the day of the funeral, "carpenters were hammering with cold chisels, trying to cut off the wrought-iron hinges Vince Blanc had put on his front door. They had to get the door off before they could bring in Mrs. Blanc's great coffin" (p. 70).

The Violent

Sudden violence is a favorite theme of Milburn's, probably because of the contrast with the idyllic village life one imagines. "Yellow Paint" from Oklahoma Town tells of a storekeeper's store windows' being painted because he failed to close his store on Armistice Day and the revenge he took on the perpetrator--"Old Man Farnum brought up the soda-water bottle he had been gripping in his right hand, and he bashed Ellis across the face with it." Once he had done this, "he tossed the bloody bottle neck he was holding into the street and went back into his store" (p. 66). Violence appears in other stories in Oklahoma Town. "Shorty Kilgore" gets into a fight over a girl at the filling station where he works. The doctor, upon examining the other man in the fight, found "that Shorty's razor had caught Emmet right between the belt and the lower points on his vest" (p. 88).

"A Hard Old Girl" (Vanity Fair, March 1931) shows that women can be violent too. This story is also a part of the Oklahoma stories, though not included in Oklahoma Town. Harriet McKindricks, when Hart Summers tried to get a date by giving her $5.00, put the money in her brassiere and slapped him down the stairs (p. 69). Harriet rejected all suitors, often with physical violence, and never married but read "Sweetheart Stories" faithfully, a victim of life's illusions (p. 69).

The Proud

The dangers of pride are easily satirized. Milburn's "Garlic" is an original and unusual example of the fall of the proud. Tom Proctor was "one of those hateful persons who always make their brags and then go ahead and do the impossible things they said they were going to do" (p. 165)--until he planted garlic as his cash crop and couldn't sell it, that is. Tom stored the garlic in the barn during the winter and in the spring thaw, the garlic began to rot (p. 166). "Down on the main road, you could hear the gas gurgling up from the great depths of rotting garlic" (p. 167). Of course, an ironic ending is almost mandatory, so Milburn has Tom finally striking out at the one man who couldn't smell the garlic because of a growth in his head. "Tom Proctor shrieked and jumped

up on the running-board and clutched at the old mail carrier's throat" (p. 169); Tom "stood in his barn door waving his arms and shouting maniacal curses after the old man" (p. 170). So much for pride.

The Baptists and the Holy Rollers

Milburn's two favorite groups for ridicule in Oklahoma Town are the Baptists and the Holy Rollers. He liked to make fun of the Baptists for their materialistic concerns in the name of religion. The story "Imogene Caraway" says that up until Imogene got religion at the Baptist revival, the Reverend Foster "had saved only three souls, and the Baptists had all that big debt for their new church hanging over them" (p. 23).

The Baptists were in a continual war of sorts with the Holy Rollers; they felt their Holiness brothers to be less than dignified. "The Baptist Christmas Tree" is, therefore, excellent satire, because their celebration becomes rather undignified. A woman screams in the middle of a solo because candle wax is running down her back (p. 90). Santa Claus is drunk and calls a little child a "goddam little brat" when the cherub pulls his glued-on beard. In the end, we have the Higgenbothams throwing corncobs at everyone in the church. The Holy Rollers felt it to be a "visitation from God" (p. 93).

A more serious criticism of a Baptist minister occurs in "Beulah Huber." The Reverend Albert Sweasy accuses Beulah of being a prostitute when she smiles at him in the corridor of the Kentucky Colonel Hotel (p. 52). Later, when she asks him what kind of girl he thinks she is and begins sobbing, he pays no attention to her. "Suddenly she turned and ran out of the dining-room. Everybody went on eating as though nothing had happened" (p. 53).

Milburn's satire of the Holy Rollers is all in good fun. He shows them as being so taken in by their shouting and singing of praises, they will do so regardless of the circumstances. Thus, when the Baptists allegedly burn down the Holy Roller meeting house because it devalued the new Baptist edifice and the Holy Rollers learn there is nothing they can do about it, they leave the lawyer's office saying "'shout the praises!'" and singing "Love Lifted Me" (p. 33).

The story "Gerald Lee Cobb" is also about the Holy Rollers. We are shown Mrs. Cobb's unusual reaction to her son's conversion. Ironically, she reveals more about herself than about Gerald and the Holy Rollers. "'I haven't got no objection to people worshipping God any way they please,' Mrs. Cobb said, 'but them Holy Rollers are plumb ridiculous. Calling themselves the Apostles

of Christ! And all that gibberish about the Unknown Tongue, yelling and capering around like niggers! They're just poor white trash and they don't know how to act'"(p. 96). Oddly, Mrs. Cobb can't seem to keep away from the Holy Roller meetings. "All the time the Holy Rollers were singing and shouting and jumping and talking in the Unknown Tongue and rolling on the ground, Mrs. Cobb would keep repeating, loud enough for the spectators around her to hear, 'The dirty hogs! Oh, to think that a son of mine could be such a filthy beast! Oh, what dirty hogs!'" (p. 97).

Innocents and Eccentrics

Milburn apparently delighted in picturing the harmless eccentrics he came across both in Oklahoma and later locations of Chicago, New York, and the Ozarks. He manages to reveal the people's ignorance in this fashion, but for the most part, his "crazies" are rather harmless souls and his descriptions are delightful rather than malicious.

Oklahoma Town is largely a compilation of the innocent but ignorant, and many of the sketches furnish original examples of humorous irony. "Looie McKindricks" is a story in which Looie is told by Lulu Sampler to "'bawl the jack on out of here! . . . You ain't got

half sense . . . Get on away from here right now!'" Looie tells a friend that he was leaving all right--"'Nobody don't have to knock me down with a hint'" (p. 29).

"Marty Titsworth" is a barber who rubs poison ivy on his face, saying it can't hurt him, "'I'm the seventh son of a seventh son'" (p. 59). Marty loses an eye, but says he'll go to Texas to cure rattlesnake bites. "'A man with a powerful charm like I got ought to be out he'ping mankind instid of wasting his time in a barber shop'" (p. 59). "Bill Hartshorn" is dying of tuberculosis in the county jail. The W. C. T. U. had had him arrested for selling Jamaica ginger. He was saving the money from this illegal sale of intoxicants to go to Arizona for a cure, but finally says he doesn't want to go anyway; it's not "'s-s-suh-civilized'" enough for a "'h-high-class trap drummer like me'" (p. 135). And, of course, nobody had to feel guilty about him.

"Banker Brigham" is so stubborn that when someone shoots him with pokeberries, he dies of a cerebral hemorrhage so he wouldn't be proved wrong when he said he was bleeding to death (p. 147). "Clark Peavy" is perhaps the most endearing example of Milburn's eccentrics. Clark was always looking for "something different" (p. 148). It might be said that this is a good description of Oklahoma Town; it is something different. "Delmer Dilbeck" is the

stingiest man in town. He is finally made to part with a little of his cash by a "mail-order wife" (p. 154). When Delmer gives her a "little blank-book" to jot down her expenses on a train trip, she tosses it on the platform once he's looking the other way (p. 156-7). This leaves Delmer running after the train, yelling, "'Hattie, you dropped your little blank-book!'" (p. 157).

Stories not in Oklahoma Town, but written about the same time, also contain some classic examples of eccentricity. "The Critic" (American Mercury, June 1930) is about an auctioneer who was also a corn judge, a man who believed himself always to be right as a "critic" (p. 188). He once decided that of two identical ears of corn that one was a "lee-e-tle" bit too light (p. 188).

"Not on Speaking Terms" is a blatant example of irony; it is also a very effective one. Mrs. Rittenhouse is definitely one of Milburn's eccentrics; she and her husband haven't spoken for thirty years because of an argument over the way the coffee was boiled (Vanity Fair, March 1931, p. 16). When, on the eve of their thirty-first anniversary, he bought her some chocolates to make it up, she naturally assumed that he planned to poison her and put strychnine in his coffee. When Mr. Rittenhouse died of this, Mrs. Rittenhouse wasn't prosecuted, of course, because she was a "white-haired old woman

and she had such a grand manner" (p. 67). Eccentrics get away with a lot in Milburn's stories.

An eccentricity carried to its logical conclusion can become an obsession. Milburn's "Biography of a Prophet" from No More Trumpets provides a rather remarkable look at such an occurrence. Dr. Goldstein, a painless dentist from Houston, Texas, is a monomaniac about Zionism, and Milburn uses Goldstein to express some questions which are still troublesome concerning Zionism, though it is Goldstein as Goldstein Milburn wants us to see, not necessarily the politics of Zionism. "But what about the Arabs in Palestine? How did they feel about the Jews moving back? What about the area and productivity of Palestine compared with the number of Jews in the world? How about the British? Couldn't you count on the British having some strings tied to that protectorate somewhere? And the U. S. A? Weren't American Jews satisfied with the U. S. A.?" (p. 193). The dentist leaves his practice, his wife, his home, to come to the university to learn to write so that he can further spread what has become his obsession. Milburn gets in a slight jab at college professors here by saying they "treated him with the coolness and suspicion that one monomaniac has for another" (p. 199). Goldstein has predicted that the Arabs will cut their

throats, and the ending is perhaps predictable. Goldstein's prophecy comes to pass. Across the front page of the "late peach-colored edition" is the headline: "MANY DEAD IN HOLY LAND MASSACRE" (p. 206). Goldstein is satisfied; he returns to Houston and is once again a "calm, efficient man . . .composed and well-satisfied" (p. 206).

The Disillusioned

The satirist specializes in noting the gap between illusion and reality. Sometimes this divergence provides humor as noted in many of the examples above. At other times, such satire becomes somewhat sad and serious. In many of the stories in No More Trumpets an element of disillusionment becomes the theme of Milburn's work. Perhaps experience was showing Milburn this disillusionment and the stories reflect this.

"A Student in Economics" is the story of Charlie Wingate, an overtired college student. He complains about compulsory R. O. T. C. (p. 72). He has to spend a hard-earned dollar--his salary is twenty cents per hour and he works all night--on a freshman beanie (p. 80). Students in the "pipe-course" Economics 150 are required to buy five of the seven books the professor had written (p. 90). Charlie's lack of time for sleep is a familiar

feeling for college students everywhere. As Charlie "slept on behind his amber glasses" the reader understands the "economics" of the title to have a very ironic meaning (p. 95).

Grandfather Beals, in "The Visit to Uncle Jake's," finds his brother to be "stooped and scrawny" (p. 74). Jake comments tellingly on Grandfather Beals' life of good living and good eating. "'Jawnie! Jawnie! Lawdy, what a belly!'" (p. 14). When Grandfather Beals leaves Jake's house in the Arkansas hills after one night, the reader knows the trip ends the dream both brothers had of rediscovering their youth after fifty years. Milburn has a way of ending a story on an "up" note, however. Grandfather Beals wrecks the flivver on the way home and gives each of his grandsons a dollar not to tell. As little boys will do, they tell first thing. "'Well, Grandpa Beals turned over his Ford today and smashed it up and nearly killed us all,' Ed said. 'He sure wrecked it for good this time,' I said importantly" (p. 22).

"Heel, Toe, and A 1, 2, 3, 4" (p. 23) reveals the pathetic mode of life of tramps and their "preshuns" and contains a very ironic ending. "Love Song" contains an exploration of the startling gap between illusion and reality, as Virgil Clay listens to "Let Me Call

You Sweetheart" and dreams "she sang to him" (p. 261) while his own wife is so cruel that she will not let him touch their baby (p. 256).

"No More Trumpets," the title story, is also a story of disillusionment, but as is Milburn's way, one can hardly feel really sorry for Claude, the young man who had been a bigshot trumpet player in the prison band. Once Claude is released, he is still the punk who held up a gas station and wished he had killed the attendant who shot his accomplice (p. 300). Though one is sorry that Claude's date calls him a "goddam jailbird," Claude evidently cannot face life as it is and lives in dreams of past glory. "If she'd ever seen me in my band uniform, it would of been different. She just didn't know who I was" (p. 313-14).

"A Position on the Staff" is Milburn's best story on the theme of disillusionment. It is also one of the few in which one sees a character change and learn during the events of the story. Paul's fondest dream is to have "a position on the staff." Milburn repeats this key phrase over and over, impressing the reader with its importance in Paul's illusions. "He had a fleeting, delicious day dream of the second morning he came to work being called into the managing editor's office for a raise in salary. Not that he had made the scoop with

any thought of getting better pay" (pp. 267-8). His first day at the Star quickly strips him of such thoughts. As the story ends, Paul has matured. He expresses this best himself, "'God!' he breathed, 'God, what a sap I was at that age'" (p. 290). He was speaking of early that morning.

Satiric Elements in Catalogue

Catalogue contains some brutal satire, but the one character, who, though he too has his human failings, is admirable throughout the book is Postmaster Shannon. Turner suggests that Milburn's father, Downey Milburn, may have served as the model for this character (p. 2). If so, Postmaster Shannon is a fine tribute. Shannon will not allow a man like the rich and powerful W. S. Winston to push him around as the others permit. He does not hate the Blacks; Shannon judges men for what they are, not for how they appear.

The satire in Catalogue is almost all-encompassing. There is a mean and stingy banker (W. S. Winston), a vain older woman (Widow Holcombe), a flighty young girl (Irene Pirtle), the despicable poor white trash (C. R. Butts), the respectable and hardworking Black (Sylvester Merrick), the amiable bootlegger (Herman Gutterman), the bashful young farmer (Homer Slover). Actually, one meets them

all originally in Oklahoma Town, only with different names. This does not indicate a lack of originality on Milburn's part, only a verification of types in the human race, illustrating the weaknesses of mankind--greed, vanity, pride, lechery, and ignorance.

Satire on the Farm--Flannigan's Folly

The satire in Flannigan's Folly is mostly directed at Flannigan and a few other country types, but Milburn also points out the folly of the other farmers who do what's new and not what's sensible. Flannigan is sensible when it comes to farming. "'As for myself, I don't believe in plowing! To tell God's truth, I never have had a plow on my place, and I raise as elegant a crop of Indian corn as ever a crow flew over'" (p. 112). Joe Griffen, the young veteran fresh out of an agricultural course, mentions a book called Plowman's Folly which essentially agrees with what Flannigan has said; however, this gives further irony to the title since even though Flannigan is not a plowman, he makes his own folly (p. 115) by bragging. It is his own obstinacy that foils him.

One particular irony that runs throughout Flannigan's Folly is related to Joe Griffen's service in World War II. When asked if he saw any action, he says that he saw some action in the Pacific, but "most of the time out there I

was raising vegetables" (p. 46). The county agent, Ollie Frost, felt that "gardening was a poor excuse for an able bodied soldier, supposed to be fighting a war" (p. 47). When Alice Pilgrim shows Joe her dead husband's purple heart, almost a shrine to her, Joe has the indelicacy to yawn (p. 121). Later, one learns that Joe also has a purple heart. He gives the medal to Widow Pilgrim's son and explains how he feels about it. "'Nobody earns anything just by stopping a bullet. When a bullet comes your way, that's something you don't jump out in front of'" (p. 198). Milburn seems to be trying to put the war into perspective, saying that growing vegetables is more important than being heroic.

Satirical Rehashing in Old John's Woman

Old John's Woman (Julie) not only rehashes "The Miller's Tale," it also rehashes much of Milburn's early satire. An interesting study could be done, matching characters and phrases in this with Milburn's earlier works. Old John is the ultimate Holy Roller. Julie is the reincarnation of Sarah Jo ("The Sacrifice of Sarah Jo"). The Pruitt brothers, Pearly and Jewel, are twice as violent as the citizens of Oklahoma Town. The characters in Old John's Woman are almost caricatures of caricatures.

One new bit of satire concerns the fair Julie and the jealous women of the town. "Now there are people who will insist that such durgen doings as drumming a person out of the community do not happen anymore" (p. 185). But the ladies run Julie out, her dress pinned up "so that her trim little bottom was bare" (p. 186). They whipped her out of town, but the town druggist finally helps her on a bus for Joplin (p. 187). Although the reader is on the verge of sympathy for Julie, he learns at the end of the book that Julie has made good use of her attractions and is next seen in jewels and furs (p. 188).

EVALUATION OF GEORGE MILBURN'S WORK

Reading reviews of Milburn's early works shows that he was expected to be a major writer. Robert Liddell Lowe said in his review of No More Trumpets for Nation that there was no one in Southwestern literature of his stature other than Katherine Ann Porter (p. 386); yet, she is obviously better known today. Hamilton Basso, reviewing Catalogue in New Republic, said that some of Milburn's short stories are among the best of our time (p. 260); few readers are familiar with them today. The New York Times Book Review speculated that Milburn might develop into one of the more important writers of his generation (p. 8), but one must surmise that such has not been the case. William Rosby said in Saturday Review in his review of No More Trumpets that Milburn had distinctly "arrived" (p. 148).

Why, then, was this early promise largely unfulfilled? Of course, many answers come to mind. The reviewers were, as noted earlier, somewhat disappointed with Catalogue. No doubt this had an effect on Milburn's later work. Stephen Turner quotes Richard Gehman in "Hoping for a Revival" (Chicago Tribune Books Today, October 23, 1966, p. 5), written after Milburn's death.

> By 1946-1947, when he and I first met, he seemed to all of us younger fellows a disillusioned man. We had been told by older men that he had been

> splendidly full of spirit. He had been told that he would be a major talent, but when his things were published and were esteemed by the critics, they did not sell well enough to support him and his family. It must have been terrible for George to face the realization that his trivial efforts, on radio, brought him more than the stories and books into which he put his main strength and soul (p. 6).

Turner also reports that Paramount once planned to film Catalogue with Bing Crosby, but this fell through (p. 7). In my opinion, the book would still make a fine film, much better than many seen today. At the time, such a picture could have meant financial salvation for George Milburn.

My study of Milburn has convinced me that he is worth reading. The humor displayed throughout his work is reason enough. The beauty and excellence of his style is also a compelling reason. Angoff, in his book about Mencken, A Portrait from Memory, says that Milburn's stories were "very well received by the critics, but at the moment, are virtually forgotten. I believe that their excellence will be appreciated once more in the future" (p. 110). Carl Bode, in his Mencken (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), observes that Mencken tried to get Alfred Knopf to publish Milburn's ironic stories, "now undeservedly forgotten" (p. 225).

It is easy to imagine reasons for Milburn's dismissal from American literature; at this point in time there are too many excellent writers to include everybody. The quantity of work he created is not large. His work is of a regional nature. These reasons are, however, hardly good enough. One more excellent writer to remember and read could not harm American literature, especially such an original one. Ironically, several of the better-known writers he is often compared to produced no more "good" work than Milburn. For example, Edgar Lee Masters is known mainly for Spoon River Anthology, and Sherwood Anderson, for Winesburg, Ohio. One work can make a writer--that is clear. Some of the greatest writers of our time have been regional writers; William Faulkner wrote only of the South, Robert Frost, of New England. One must delve deeper to ascertain the reasons for Milburn's obscurity.

It is sometimes felt that for literature to be great and lasting, it must show change and growth in its characters. It is true that most masterpieces of literature do incorporate this aspect of change and learning. All great tragedy has this element. With perhaps a few minor exceptions, noted above in the section on disillusionment, Milburn's characters do not change. With him, this lack of change is both a stylistic and satiric element. That people will always be as they are is almost his "message."

I do not think that George Milburn believed that people in the real world changed. He was in this respect somewhat of a cynic.

It must be remembered, however, that Milburn was basically a writer of satire. Lack of change in characters is inherent in good satire. Dr. Leonard Feinberg's Introduction to Satire (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1967) points out that satire is read for aesthetic satisfaction, not for ethical instruction (p. 16). He emphasizes that satire does not usually lead men to change, that satirists are ineffective as social forces because, although they can see the faults of others, they can't really see their own (p. 255). Feinberg says that people may respect satirists, but they don't love them (p. 263). The good people of Coweta, Oklahoma, may not have been as thrilled with Oklahoma Town as the critics were. Reading Feinberg's excellent analysis of the limitations of satire, one begins to suspect that Milburn is a classic case. If satire opens on Monday and closes on Saturday, as Feinberg quotes George S. Kaufman as remarking (p. 363), it may be difficult to remember the author's name fifty years later.

The question becomes whether or not Milburn made the choice to write as he did consciously or whether he hoped to somehow overcome these limitations. I personally think

that he wrote what he wanted to write, but that in many cases, external financial pressures kept him from achieving more. Insecurity can lead to disillusionment. As it is, George Milburn wrote several stories which are classics of their kind. "A Student in Economics" and "The Fight at Hendryx's," for example, can hardly be forgotten by anyone who has read them. Oklahoma Town is probably unique in American literature. George Milburn's accomplishments can stand.

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The University of Oklahoma Library is now collecting George Milburn's works, letters, and memorabilia. The collection was donated to the Bizzell Memorial Library by Mary Milburn, George Milburn's widow. The collection is substantially complete and can be viewed at the library.

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Van Doren, Carl. Rev. of Catalogue. New York Herald Tribune Books, 13 September 1936, p. 7. The heading for this: "With Mail Order Catalogues as Theme Song: Mr. Milburn Aided by 'Sears Sawbuck' and 'Monkey Ward,' Makes His Oklahoma Town Live." The reviewer feels that the device of the catalogue is so good that it is surprising that Milburn was the first to use it.

Van Doren, Mark. "Fiction of the Quarter." Rev. of Catalogue. Southern Review, 3 (July 1937-April 1938), 159. Van Doren reviews Catalogue among other books and finds that Milburn shows men to be "machines made to be sold at the 10¢ store."

Vestal, Stanley. "Life in a Small Town." Rev. of Oklahoma Town. Saturday Review of Literature, 7 March 1931, p. 643. This reviewer says that Milburn knows folklore so well that the book itself becomes folklore.

Winebaum, B. V. "Life in Buried Hatchet, Oklahoma." Rev. of Flannigan's Folly. New York Times Book Review, 4 May 1947, p. 14. Reviewer does not like the book as well as he liked Catalogue, but he finds the total effect like "listening to the radio . . ." It "may not surprise, but it's often satisfying."

APPENDIX

"Sketch of George Milburn"[6]

By Savoie Lottinville

The young man who came into the newsroom of The Oklahoma Daily that early September afternoon fifty years ago could have been a company representative or an advertising salesman, or even a late-blooming student. He was of small build but squarish, his face a broad, freckled expanse, the blue eyes those of a person who had done door-to-door selling, expectant but ready to light up. The brown hair was medium cut but a thickish parcel tended to slip down over his right eye. He was wearing a white linen suit and brown shoes.

"My name's Milburn--George Milburn," he said, as he extended his hand and then quickly brushed back the unwilling hair. "I'm starting to school here and I think I'm going to need to work. Got anything for a reporter?"

"Have you had any experience?" I asked.

"Yes," he told me. "Most recently I've been writing Little Blue Books for Haldemann-Julius up in Kansas. But I've been a reporter on The Tulsa World, the Topeka Journal Capital, and a couple of others."

Clearly, here was a reporter who had been around. He had also written books on assignment. Not big books but even a Little Blue Book was more than I had ever written. As editor of the paper, I was facing an old pro. A student editor hardly ever came up against anything like this. What do you do?

"Why don't you give us a little time for a day or two and we'll see how you get along?" I told him. He was agreeable, but before he asked for an assignment, which I was ready to give, he asked me if he couldn't write a trial column--a personal column but unsigned--to go wherever we could fit it in.

He had my measure and he knew it. So did I.

"You know," he said, his freckled face crinkling up, the eyes dancing just a bit, "a feature but with personal overtones. Then maybe we can see." I told him, sure, why not?

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He sat down right away at a typewriter I let him use and, without removing his white linen jacket, he began banging away on a piece of yellow copy-paper. In something over an hour he turned in his copy, thanked me, and went off to find a student room where he could put his things, which were still down at the railroad station, he told me.

We old amateurs around the room took a hurried look but a thorough one at what our man from off the road had produced. He had not only written his piece but had marked it up with a soft black copy pencil, the kind used on slots and rewrite desks. Well, he must have been a copy editor too, a double-pro. But what he had written was the payoff.

It started for nowhere, moved right in to the delightful game of audience grabbing, and ended six hundred words later with a kicker. Heywood Broun up in New York was my hero then, a little ahead, perhaps, of Walter M. Harrison, writing his daily front-page column, "Tiny Times" for the Oklahoma City Times. (I was thinking up a column like his for the front page of my paper, but I hadn't started it yet.) But what I was reading now by George Milburn belonged in Smart Set. This man could write!

We had to have this guy, I told my staffers. But clearly we couldn't have two personal columns, and I was unwilling to give mine up. Eddie Mills, my student city editor, had an idea. Why not let Milburn write a humor column on the editorial page--a Franklin P. Adams kind of thing--while my column of serious issues could go where I had planned it. Paul P. Kennedy, my managing editor (later to be a distinguished foreign correspondent for the New York Times) thought that a good idea. But how could we pay him? John Fischer (later to be editor of Harper's) was getting the only freshman job we had to offer that fall, one paying perhaps fifteen dollars a month. But if we could get the Business Office to let us have another fifteen, we'd be in business.

As I remember it, Dick Pearce, the campus editor on my staff (later to be the gifted roving feature-writer for the San Francisco Chronicle and a notable short story writer and novelist) took Eddie Mills with him and carried the message to Garcia in the Business Office. They could have conned anybody into anything, and did.

That's how George Milburn started writing a humor column in The Oklahoma Daily. Eddie Mills (later to be boss of the City Room at Gary, Indiana) had come honestly by his bright idea for employing Milburn. He had watched his father Walt write an inside column

for years for the Oklahoma City Times. He knew what such a venture could do to brighten up the dullest page in an American newspaper of the nineteen-twenties.

The trouble was that, as George Milburn ground out his daily columns, our campus and town audience read little else in our paper. Even the President of the University of Oklahoma, William Bennett Bizzell, seemed to read nothing else. And for good reason.

As Milburn got his second wind, he became emboldened to try new genres. Most of them were hardly new in the history of letters. They were positive, however, in skirting those niceties which a Victorian-raised college administrator would find desirable. My ultimate boss, President Bizzell, developed the habit of having me come over to his office in the afternoon, on the call of his secretary. With variations (he had a genuine talent with the English language), he would smile at me and say, "Savoie, it's not that this material George Milburn is writing bothers me but it is occasioning a lot of telephone calls from our taxpayers."

Earnestly I would promise to go back and get Milburn to turn things down a bit. Two days of calm would intervene, then I'd be back visiting with President Bizzell again. My trouble, of course, was that I always believed Milburn when he said, with that crinkling grin of his, that he was sure enough going to reform this time.

Circulation was meantime booming and everybody was talking about Milburn's latest. To be honest about it, most of us who went over his copy were too young and too unsophisticated to catch his full meaning before we got into type and the presses were rolling. I began to notice, too, that President Bizzell often had to be told by "taxpayers" what to look for. So it really wasn't a question of maturity or the lack of it. You had to have an eye for certain incongruities (I forget who called them that, but it seemed a good idea to me at the time).

This kind of thing couldn't go on forever, but not for President Bizzell's reasons. As a matter of fact, it didn't run beyond February, four months later. The Cleveland County Times, run by another old pro, Rolle Ralls, saw in Milburn's talent just what it needed for circulation. Milburn himself knew the difference between fifteen dollars a month and fifty. He left us, and Milburn's column in the Times went on until still larger editorial brains saw his measure. The brains were H. L. Mencken's.

Milburn had known American Mercury before he showed up on our doorstep. But he apparently couldn't afford

the magazine on fifteen a month, or even fifty. My father, on the other hand, had given me a subscription with the first issue and had kept it up for me. I seem to recall Milburn as having been a first-claimant to second readership of my copies of the magazine. Anyway, he began sending things in to Mencken some months after he had won Norman, Oklahoma, as they say, by storm. What then followed is a matter of literary and bibliographical record. But the cultural setting is not.

The state of Oklahoma, in Milburn's first weeks as a student, was only twenty years old. Back of 1906 was Indian Territory (I won't go into what Oklahoma Territory was, except to say that it was an unoccupied rectangle in the center of the future state until 1889). Sixty-seven Indian tribes had lived here or been resettled by various treaties, from the Ozarks to the High Plains. Even after the land rushes into the newly opened Oklahoma Territory in 1889 and the Cherokee Outlet in 1893, the setting was hardly one in which a literary culture could quickly or easily take root. But, curious to say, it did.

Burton Rascoe of Ada was already building a literary reputation for himself, even though he would soon be claimed by Chicago, later by New York. Benjamin Albert Botkin, a first cousin of an American musical hero, George Gershwin, had come down to Oklahoma from New York to become a professor of English and develop the richest trove in folklore the country was to have. Stanley Vestal was writing Sitting Bull and a delightful volume of ballads, Fandango, and his wife Isabel was writing a novel Jack Sprat. In the Daily Oklahoman, May Frank was running a full page of reviews--sometimes two--in each Sunday's issue. Her reviewers included Helene Carpenter, later to develop into a first-rate short-story writer. Joseph A. Brandt had only just been weaned away from the City Desk at the Tulsa Tribune to become the first director of the University of Oklahoma Press. In Enid, Marquis James was already showing signs of becoming, if not a man of letters, then a highly respected biographer (The Raven, a biography of Sam Houston, would appear in 1929). And so on and so on, to Lynn Riggs (Green Grow the Lilacs).

There was everywhere a good gabble of creativity and a critical sense sharpened by--not simply the larger trends of the times in Chicago, where Harriet Monroe was conducting Poetry: The Magazine of Verse, and Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur set about The Front Page, and Vincent Starrett, while not spinning inimitable tales, was observing the local literary renascence, nor New York, which was watching its trans-Atlantic novelists grow up--

but by recent memory. Twenty years before, one of the most gifted minds of the century, a literary historian who has perhaps had no equal since, Vernon Louis Parrington, had just closed a ten year stint (1897-1908) as Professor of English in the University of Oklahoma. (He had also been the University's first football coach.) The concluding volume of his Main Currents in American Thought appeared after his death in 1931.

All over America the sense of story, the struggle for new forms, the wish to probe man's living expressions of himself, were striving for realization in written forms. How could the old Indian Territory escape all this? The answer is, of course, that it couldn't. The trick, however, is to find what was unique about Oklahoma's contribution to its literary age.

To George Milburn, the writer, everything of this character had a certain validity to it. Even though, with Mencken, he often pursued hick themes, the sophisticated intellectual surroundings he found himself in were respected. Perhaps the only practitioner of the craft of criticism he couldn't quite fathom was a slight, sharp-faced professor of modern languages, Roy Temple House, who, the academic year before, had launched an international journal in Norman called Books Abroad. Here was a man who knew something about almost everything. But like many another, he lacked the gift of "creative faith." The quality of dreaming was what Milburn sought, and never quite achieved.

He was married to Vivien Custard and they had a daughter during his student days. He wrote and published and traveled. He became the principal writer for the radio series, Scattergood Baines, and he probably hated every moment of that. But it was a way to make a living. And he finally died. And so do we all.